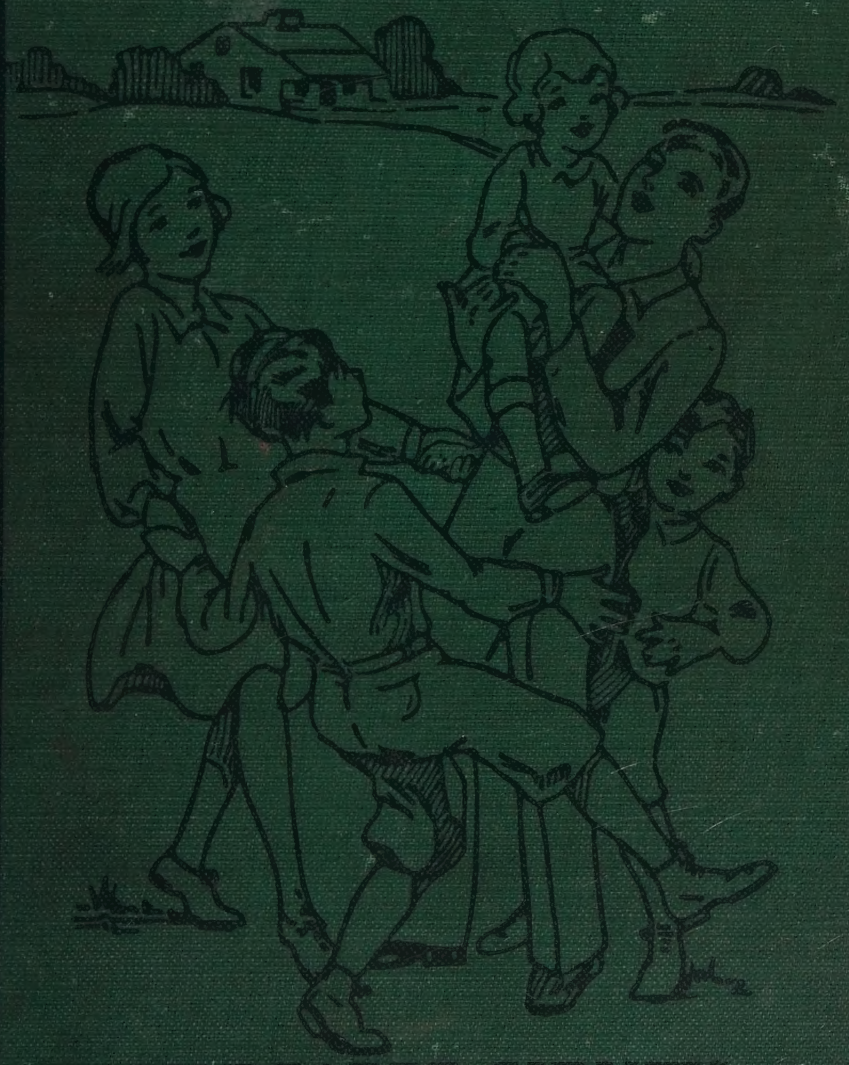
FIVE LITTLE PEPPERS
THE ADVENTURES OF JOEL PEPPER



MARGARET SIDNEY

MRS. PEPPER AND POLLY WATCHING THEM FROM THE DOOR-STONE.—*Page 353.*

THE ADVENTURES *of* JOEL PEPPER

By
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THE ADVENTURES OF JOEL PEPPER

I

JOEL AND THE SNAKE

"COME on, Dave!"

It was Joel's voice, and Polly pricked up her ears. "'Tisn't going to hurt you. Hoh! you're a 'fraid-cat — old 'fraid-cat!"

"No, I'm not 'fraid-cat," declared little Davie, trying to speak stoutly; "I'm coming, Joel," and his little rusty shoes pattered unevenly down the rickety board walk.

"Jo-*el!*" called Polly, thinking it quite time now to interfere.

Joel scuttled behind the old woodshed, and several smothered grunts proclaimed his disapproval at the interruption.

"Now I know you're up to some mischief," declared Polly, "so you just come into the house, Joel Pepper, and tell me what it is."

"'Tisn't," said Joel, loudly insisting. "*Don't go, Dave,*" in a loud whisper. Thereupon ensued a lively scuffle, evidently, by the noise they made.

"I must," said little Davie; "Polly called us."

"No, she didn't call *you*," declared Joel. "You stay here. She said 'Joel.'"

"Bo-*oys!*" sang out Polly's voice, not to have any doubt in the matter.

"There, she did call me," cried Davie, wriggling to get free from Joel's clutch; "she said 'boys!'"

"She's always calling us," said Joel, in an injured voice, dragging himself away from the charms of the woodshed to straggle slowly back to the house.

There sat Polly on the big stone that served as a step for the back door, with her hands folded in her lap. Little Davie skipped by Joel, and ran up to her, with a flushed face.

"Now I should like to know what you've been up to, Joey Pepper?" said Polly, her brown eyes full on him.

"Haven't been up to anything," mumbled Joel, hanging his chubby face.

"Yes, you have, I know," declared Polly, in her most positive fashion; "now tell me what

it is, and right straight off, Joel. Begin." She kept her hands still folded in her lap. "What were you going to do?"

Joel squirmed all over the little patch of ground before the flat doorstone, and dug the toes of his shoes into the dirt.

"Don't do so," cried Polly. "You'll get bigger holes in 'em. Oh, Joel, to think how naughty you are, and Mamsie away!"

At that Joel gave a loud howl, nearly upsetting Polly from her stone; then, digging his two fists into his eyes, he plunged forward and thrust his black head on the folded hands in her lap. "I ain't naughty," he screamed. "I ain't, and Mamsie won't care. O dear — ooh — ooh!"

"Tell me what you were going to do, before I can say you are not naughty," said Polly, dreadfully frightened at his outburst, but not unfolding her hands.

"I was only going to — going to — going to —" mumbled Joel, trying to burrow past her hands, and get into the comforting lap.

"Going to do what?" demanded Polly, still not moving.

"I was going to — going to —" said Joel, in smothered tones.

"Stop saying you were going to," commanded Polly, in her firmest tones.

"You told me to tell you," said Joel. "O dear! I was going to — "

"Well, tell then, at once; what were you going to do? Hurry up, Joe; now go on."

"I was going to — " began Joel again. "O dear me! I was going to — " he mumbled, burrowing deeper yet.

"Joel Pepper!" cried Polly, in a tone that brought him bolt upright, his round face streaked with tears that his dirty little hands had tried to wipe off, the rest of them trailing over his round nose. "O dear me! Now you must go into the 'provision room' and stay. Don't you remember Mamsie said you'd have to go there the next time you wouldn't tell what you'd done?" And Polly looked as if she were going to cry at once.

"Oh, no — no!" screamed Joel, in the greatest distress, and clutching Polly's arm. "I'll tell you, Polly; I'll tell." And he began to rattle off a lot of words, but Polly stopped him.

"No, it's too late now. I've said it, and you must go; for Mamsie wouldn't like it if you didn't."

Thereupon Joel gave a terrible howl. Little Davie, in distress, clapped his hands to his ears. "Oh, Polly, don't make him," he was saying, when heavy steps came around the corner of the house. "Any ra-ags to sell?" sang out the voice of a very big man.

Joel took one black eye away from his brown hands, and shot a sharp look at him. Then he howled worse than ever.

"No," said Polly, "not to-day, Mr. Biggs. There was a bagful Mamsie said I might sell, but I can't get it now."

"Sho! that's too bad," ejaculated Mr. Biggs. "What's the matter with him?" pointing a square, dingy thumb at Joel. "Stomach-ache?"

"No," said Polly, sadly, "it's worse than that. Please go away, Mr. Biggs, and come some other day."

"Worse'n stomach-ache," said Mr. Biggs, in astonishment, and slapping his big hands together; "then I can't take him with me. But t'other one might go, if you say so, marm." He always called Polly marm, and she liked it very much. He now pointed to David.

"Where are you going?" asked Polly, while

David took away his hands from his ears to hear, too.

"Why, you see, marm, Mis' Pettingill, up to th' East Quarter — you know Mis' Pettingill?"

"No," said Polly.

"I do," roared Joel, forgetting his distress. "I know, Polly. She lives in a nice yellow house, and there's a duck-pond, and cherry trees." He pranced up to Mr. Biggs, smiling through his tears.

"That's it," cried Mr. Biggs, delighted at being understood. "This boy knows." He laid his hand heavily on Joel's shoulder. "Well, he seems to be better now, so I'll take him and t'other one along of me, marm, if you say so. Ye see, Mis' Pettingill told me to come up there sometime, 'cause she's got a lot o' rags — ben a-makin' quilts, she said, all winter, and I laid out to go to-day, so here I be, on my way."

"Whickets!" shouted Joel, the last tear gone. "Come on, Dave. Oh, won't we have fun! I'm going to sit in the middle. Let me drive. Let me, Mr. Biggs." He swarmed all over the big rag-man.

Little David stood perfectly still and clasped his hands in delight.

"'WHICKETS!' SHOUTED JOEL, THE LAST TEAR GONE"

Polly drew a long breath, and the rosy color flew out of her cheek. "You can't go, Joe," she said slowly. "Mamsie wouldn't like it, after you've been naughty."

Joel's arms fell down at his side, and he stared wildly at her a moment. Then he flung himself flat on the ground and roared.

"He's worse agin," said Mr. Biggs, in great distress. "I guess he wants pep'mint. My mother used to give me that when I'd et green apples."

But Polly shook her head. "He can't go, Mr. Biggs," she said; "but Davie can."

At this little Davie gave a squeal of joy, and took three steps down the grass plot, but stopped suddenly.

"All right," said Mr. Biggs, heartily. "Come on, boy; I must be off. It's a good piece down to Mis' Pettingill's. And she always wants me to take time a-weighin' her rags." And he began to lumber off.

"I don't want to go if Joel can't," said Davie, slowly, and turning his back to the red rag-wagon waiting out in the road. He twisted his fingers hard, and kept saying, "No, I don't want to go, Polly, if Joel can't."

"All right, Davie," said Polly, beginning to cuddle him; "only you must remember, Mr. Biggs won't go again this summer out to Mrs. Pettingill's, most likely."

Davie shook his head again, and twisted his fingers worse than ever. "I don't want to go if Joel can't," he said, while Joel roared harder still, if that were possible. So Polly had to run down the grassy slope to overtake Mr. Biggs, who was now getting up into his red cart, in front of the dangling tin dishes, brooms, and pails with which it was filled.

"If you please, sir," she said, the rosy color all over her cheek, "there can't either of the boys go."

"Hey? What's the matter with the littlest one," cried Mr. Biggs, turning around with one foot on the shaft. "Is he took sick, too?"

"No — no," said Polly, clasping her hands in distress, "but he won't go unless Joel goes. Oh, I do thank you so much, Mr. Biggs, for asking them."

"Sho now! that's too bad," said the rag-man, his foot still on the shaft, and his big face wrinkled perplexedly. "Beats all, how suddint

they're took. Now you better give 'em a dose o' pep'mint, marm, both on 'em."

But Polly shook her head as she ran back up the grassy slope again. So Mr. Biggs had nothing to do but to drive off, which he did, staring hard at them; and every little while he turned back, to gaze in astonishment over his shoulder, until the big red wagon went round the slope of the hill and was lost to view.

"Now, Joel," said Polly, firmly, "you must just stop making such a noise, and go right into the provision room, and get the stool, and sit down till I tell you to get up."

To sit down on the old wooden stool in the middle of the provision room, with the door shut, was one of the worst punishments that Mrs. Pepper inflicted; and Polly's cheek got quite white. Little Davie, on seeing this, untwisted his fingers and went up to her. "Don't cry, Polly," he said suddenly, as he saw her face, and laid his hand in hers.

Joel stopped roaring, and looked up at her through his tears.

"I'm not going to cry," said Polly, "because I know Joel will be good now, and go at once and get on his stool in the provision room."

Joel swallowed hard and stumbled up to his feet, wiping his cheeks with the back of one grimy hand.

"That's right," said Polly; "now go right in and shut the door."

"O dear me," said little Davie, hiding his face in Polly's gown, as Joel went slowly off. They could hear the provision room door shut. Then Polly turned. "Oh, Davie," she cried. Then she stopped, at the sight of his face.

"Now you and I must go in the house and think of something to do for Mamsie before she gets home," she cried in a cheery burst. So they both hurried in over the old flat stone.

"Now what will it be, Davie?" asked Polly, with another glance at his pale little face. "Let's think," she wrinkled her brows in perplexity.

"We can't wash the dishes," said Davie, slowly, standing quite still in the middle of the old kitchen, "'cause they're all done, Polly."

"No, and we can't wash the floor, 'cause that's all done," said Polly, wrinkling her forehead worse than ever. "Dear me, we must think of something, Davie. O dear me, what can it be?"

"We might," said little David, slowly, "try to write some letters, Polly. That would make Mamsie glad, I guess."

"O dear me," exclaimed Polly, in dismay, "I suppose it would, Davie." She sighed, and stood quite still.

"I s'pose Mamsie would say, 'How nice,'" said little David, reflectively.

"And you and I ought to get right at it this very minute," declared Polly, all her energy returning to her after that one dreadful pause, "so come on." And presently the two had the old table against the wall pulled out into the middle of the kitchen floor, and Polly ran and got the big piece of foolscap paper laid away carefully in the upper bureau drawer in the bedroom. Across the top ran the letters set there by the minister in obedience to Mrs. Pepper's request.

"I'll get the brown paper — let me, Polly," cried David, quite in his usual spirits now. And he clambered up, and got out a carefully folded piece laid away after it had come home wrapped around one of the parcels of coats and sacks Mrs. Pepper had taken to sew.

"Won't it be most beautiful when we can write on the white paper, Polly?" he cried, as

he ran back into the kitchen, waving the brown paper at her.

Polly set the precious copy along the top of the white foolscap, straight on the table.

"Oh, that will be a long time, Davie," she said, gazing in an awe-struck way at the array of wonderful letters Parson Henderson had made for them. "Mamsie won't ever let us try until we can make 'em good and straight. O dear me, I don't s'pose I'll ever get a chance." She sighed; for writing bothered Polly dreadfully. "The old pen twists all up whenever I get it in my hand, and everything goes crooked."

"Oh, Polly, you're going to write real nice, by and by," said little Davie, setting down the brown paper, and smoothing out the creases. "Now where's the ink-bottle? Let me get it, Polly, do," he begged, running over to the corner cupboard.

"No, you mustn't, Dave," said Polly in alarm, "you'll spill it. I'll get it," hurrying after him.

"I won't spill it, Polly"—but Polly was already on her tiptoes, and lifting down the old black ink-horn that had been Father Pepper's. "Isn't it nice that Mrs. Henderson filled it up for us so good?" she said, carrying it over care-

fully to set on the table. "You can get the pen, Davie."

So David ran over to the shelf where, in a corner behind the little china mug given to Phronsie when she was a baby, lay the pen in its long black holder. Getting up on a chair, he seized it.

"If Phronsie hadn't gone with Mamsie, she'd want to write," he said, "wouldn't she, Polly?" as he hopped down again.

"Yes, indeed," said Polly, drawing up the inkstand into the best place, and sighing. "Well, dear me, I'd ever so much rather hold her hand while she writes, than to do it myself." And she gave a long stretch.

"Then you wouldn't ever learn yourself," said little Davie, wisely, and putting the pen down carefully.

"No," said Polly, with a little laugh, "I s'pose I shouldn't, Davie." O dear me, she thought, I ought not to laugh when Joel's in there all alone in the provision room. "Well, now we're all ready. I'm just going to peek and see if he's all right. You stay here, Davie."

With that she hopped off down the little steps

to look through the big crack in the old door of the provision room.

"Why — where —" she started back and rubbed her eyes, and stared again. "Oh! Davie," she screamed. Then she clapped her hands over her mouth. "It never'd do to scare him," she said. And she opened the provision room door and rushed in. The old stool stood in the middle of the floor, but there was no Joel to be seen.

Polly ran here and there. "Joel — *Joel!*" she cried, peering into every corner, and looking into the potato bag and behind some boxes that the storekeeper had given the boys to make things out of, and that were kept as great treasures. "O dear me, what shall I do? I must tell Davie now, so he can help me find him —" when she heard a funny noise, and rushing outside, she heard Joel say, "Don't come, Polly, he's 'most dead."

Polly gave a gasp, and bounded to his side, as Joel flopped around on the ground, his back toward her, his black eyes fastened on something doubled up in his fists.

"O dear me, Joel, what is it?" cried Polly, bending over him.

"Ow — go way!" roared Joel, twisting worse than ever, and squeezing his brown hands together tightly; "he'll get away, maybe, and bite you."

"Oh, he'll bite you, Joe," cried Polly, in great alarm. "O dear me, let me see what it is! I can help, Joel, I can help."

She flung herself down on the ground close to his side. Just then out rushed Davie from the provision room.

"Keep him away, keep him away," screamed Joel, trying to turn his back on both of them. But Polly caught sight of a dangling thing hanging from his clenched hands.

"Oh, Joel!" She gave one scream, "It's a snake!"

"I know it," said Joel, trying to twitch back again; "it's an ugly mean old adder, Polly, but he's most dead. I've squeezed his neck."

"Let me see him," cried Polly. "Turn around, Joel. I'll help you. O dear me!" as Joel whirled back, the long body of the snake flopping from one side to the other. "If he'd keep still, I could cut off his tail high up. I'll go and get the hatchet —" and she ran off.

"Hoh! you needn't," cried Joel after her, in

great dudgeon, and giving a final wrench. "There, I've deaded him; see, Polly — see, Dave!" and he held the snake up triumphantly.

"A snake!" screamed Davie, tumbling over backward on the grass. "O dear me, it's a snake, Polly!" and he huddled up his feet and tucked them under him.

"Ain't he big?" cried Joel, swinging the long dangling body at Davie as Polly ran back.

"Don't scare him, Joel," she cried. "C goodness me! What a big one, and a gray adder, too. Oh, Joel, are you sure he didn't bite you anywhere? Do throw him down and let me see," she begged anxiously. But Joel swung the snake back and forth. "Hoh, I guess not!" he said scornfully, "not a single snip, Polly. Ain't he big! I killed him all alone by myself."

"Yes — yes, but do put him down, Joel," she begged, "and let me see if you're all right."

So Joel at last set his snake on the ground, and straightened out his tail; then he commenced to run all around him. "Ain't he a buster, Polly!" he cried, his eyes shining.

Polly looked at him reprovingly out of her

brown eyes. "Mamsie wouldn't like you to say that word," she began. "But you won't again, I know," seeing his face.

"No," said Joel, brightening up, "I won't, Polly. But ain't he big! You couldn't a-killed him, Dave," he cried at little Davie tucking up his toes under him on the grass.

"No," said Davie. "O dear me, he may be alive and bite us all now."

"Hoh!" exclaimed Joel, "he's just as dead as anything. See!" and he twitched up the long gray snake by the tip of the tail and swung it over his head.

"Oh, don't, Joe!" begged Polly, running over to put her arms around David, who burrowed into them as far as he could. "Do put him down, and come and tell us how you killed him. There, let's all sit down on the doorstep. Come, boys."

"I'm going to hold my snake," announced Joel, stopping the swing in mid-air to pat the adder's head lovingly. "Ain't he sweet, Polly?"

Davie shivered and turned his eyes away.

"No, you must not hold him," said Polly, decisively. "If you do, you can't sit on the step beside us."

"Then I won't hold him," said Joel, running up to them, "but I'll have him close to me," and he laid the snake by the side of the doorstep. "I'm going to sit here by you, Polly."

Little Davie thrust up his head and looked fearfully around Polly.

"You can't have that snake here, Joel," announced Polly, in her most determined tone. "Put him off on the grass in the orchard," as the one scraggy apple tree was called. "Now hurry, like a good boy, and then come and tell us how you killed him."

"I can't see him good, 'way off there," grumbled Joel, and picking up his snake he dragged him through the grass. "Just a little bit nearer," he pleaded.

"Not a single bit of an inch nearer, Joel Pepper," said Polly, firmly. So Joel laid the snake down and ran back and sat down on the end of the step by Polly.

"Now begin," said Polly.

"Well, I was sittin' on the old stool," said Joel, his chubby face getting very red, "when I heard a scrunchin' an' a swishin', an' I thought 'twas you, Polly, so I didn't look round."

"No," said Polly, with a little shiver, "it wasn't me. Go on, Joey."

"Well, it scrunched an' it swished, and it didn't stop, so then I looked around."

"O dear me!" exclaimed Polly, throwing one arm around Joel, and drawing him to her. Little Davie sat up quite straight and folded his hands.

"And he was sticking up his head behind the potato bag, looking at me just like this." Joel flew off the doorstep and stood up as tall as possible and ran out his tongue.

Little Davie gave a loud scream. "Oh, you brave Joel!" exclaimed Polly, tumbling off from the doorstep to throw her arms around him, and kiss his stubby black hair.

"Phoo! that's nothing!" cried Joel, who always hated to be praised.

"And I'm just as proud of you as I can be," Polly ran on with kindling eyes. "Oh, Joel!"

Joel wriggled all over with delight at that "Oh, Joel!"

"And now come back and tell us the rest," said Polly, hanging to his brown hand. "Go on, Joel," as they sat down again on the doorstep.

"Well, he looked at me, and I looked at him," said Joel, "and then I said 'Squish!' and he bobbed down his head, just a minute, and I jumped and I grabbed him by the neck, and that's all, Polly." And Joel gave a long stretch.

But Polly had her arms around his neck. "Oh, you brave, brave Joel," she cried. "Mamsie'll be so proud of you! Think what she'll say when she comes home!"

II

WHAT DAVE HEARD

"DAVE," said Joel, in a whisper. It was the middle of the night, and the loft was very still, save for Ben's breathing over in his bed in the corner.

"Don't say a word!" Joel laid his mouth close to the ear on the straw pillow; "if you do, I'll nip you and snip you."

"Ow!" said little Davie, huddling down under the scanty blanket and dragging it over his head.

"Sh—, be still!" cried Joel, with a wrathful pinch. "Ben'll hear you,—there now, just see!"

"What's the matter, boys?" asked Ben, sleepily.

Down flew Joel in a heap under his end of the blanket, where he bestowed a kick from one set of toes on David in a little heap against the wall.

The loft was as still as a mouse, so Ben turned over again. "I guess Joel wanted a

drink of water, and he's gone to sleep and forgot all about it. Now, that's good," and off he went again.

Joel's black stubby head popped up, and he peered into the darkness. "Now, I've got to wait ever'n ever so long," he grumbled softly to himself. "No, there he goes!" he added joyfully, as Ben breathed hard. "Now, Dave," he rolled over and ducked under the blanket-end, "if you scream again, I'll snip, and snip, and snip you, most dreadful."

"I won't," declared little David, fearfully. "Oh, I won't, Joe," huddling off from the little brown fingers.

"Promise, now, you'll never tell, — black and blue, — hope to die if I do."

"We must tell Mamsie," said David.

Joel gave an impatient wriggle. "Mamsie won't care, and she's too busy. Now say it, 'black and — '"

"And we must tell Polly," cried little Davie, in a smothered voice. "Oh, Joel, we *must* tell Polly."

"*Sh!*" cried Joel, with a warning pinch on the small arm that sent David into a worse heap than before. "Now, you've gone and

waked Ben up again," and he pricked up one ear from under the bedclothes.

"Oh!" exclaimed little David, thinking of Mamsie and Polly whom he was not to tell.

Joel drew a long breath, as Ben did not stir.

"Well, say 'black and blue — hope to die if I do,'" commanded Joel, sliding back again under the blanket. "Hurry up, Dave."

"'Black and — blue — hope — to die if I do,'" mumbled poor little David, stuffing the end of the blanket into his mouth, trying not to cry as he thought of Mamsie and Polly.

"Now, you know I've found a cave, and I'm goin' up there to live some day," announced Joel in a smothered whisper, his mouth close to David's ear.

"Where?" cried David, fearfully.

"*Sh!* don't speak so loud. Over in 'Bandy Leg Mountain.'"

"Ooh, — dear me!" cried David, stopping himself in the middle of a scream. "Won't old 'Bandy Leg' catch you, Joel?"

"Hoh — no, I ain't afraid!" declared Joel. "He's been dead a hundred years, I guess. An' beside, I could knock him flat, yes, sir-ree!" He doubled up his little brown fist,

and bounced up in the middle of the old shake-down.

"What's the matter, Joe?" called Ben, sleepily; "turn over and go to sleep, and you'll forget again about the drink of water."

Joel flung himself flat, and burrowed along the whole length of the bed, knocking Davie's shins all the way.

"You're pullin' all the blanket off me," said Davie, clutching his end from Joel's frantic grasp.

"Go to sleep, boys," said Ben, sharply. "And Joe, stop grumbling for a drink of water. Now you've waked up David."

Joel gripped Davie fast and clapped one hand over his mouth.

"Dear me, I think Ben might stay asleep a minute," he muttered in an injured voice. "Now, don't you speak a single word and I'll tell you all about it," after a long pause, in which they heard nothing but a rat nibbling away in the corner.

"I'm goin' up there to-morrow, an' I'm goin' to take my gun, an' some things to eat, an'—"

"Oh, Joel!" interrupted little David, "you can't ever in all this world. Polly won't let you."

"Polly'll let us go an' play some to-morrow," said Joel, sturdily, "'cause there ain't any work to do. So there now! An' maybe I'll see a bear. An' —"

"O dear me!" exclaimed little Davie, quite overcome, and trembling in every limb. "He'll eat you. Joel, I'm going to tell Polly."

"You can't," said Joel, coolly; "you said 'Black-an-blue-hope-to-die-if-I-do,' and I'm goin' to take you."

"Oh, I can't go," declared Davie, bouncing up in terror. "I ain't goin'. I ain't, Joey. I ain't —"

"*Sh-sh!*" warned Joel, with another nip.

"I ain't — I ain't —" cried David, softly, through his tears.

"Pshaw! I guess there ain't any bear up there," said Joel, scornfully. "Be still, Dave!"

"An' old — old Bandy Legs'll catch — catch me," mumbled David, digging his small knuckles into his eyes.

"Old Bandy Legs has been dead ever'n ever so long. I guess a thousand years," said Joel; "an' there's flowers there — oh, most beautiful ones!"

"Are there?" asked David, taking down his hands. "What kinds, Joel?"

"Oh, all sorts. The most be-yewtiful flowers, red and yellow and green, you can't think, Dave Pepper."

"I never saw a green flower," said little David, thoughtfully.

"Well, they're up there. Oh, sights an' sights," said Joel, recklessly. "An' pink and blue an' —"

"Are you sure there are green flowers up there, Joel?" asked David, huddling up to him close.

"Sh — stop talking — oh, the most *beyewtiful* things, I tell you, grow up by that cave."

"I might go up and get some not very near the cave, Joel," said Davie, after a long breath. "Not very near."

"So you could," said Joel, quickly. "Then I guess you'll be glad, Dave Pepper, that you came up with me."

"I shall bring down most of the green ones, Joey," cried little David, joyfully, "'cause I can get the others down below the mountain."

"Yes — yes," whispered Joel, impatiently.

"An' if I plant 'em, they'll grow, and then Mamsie'll be glad, an' Polly too," he whispered,

dreadfully excited. "Won't Polly be glad though, Joe? She's never seen a green flower."

"Yes; now go to sleep," cried Joel, with a nudge, "and remember not to say a word to me to-morrow about it."

"Can't I say anything to you behind the wood pile?" asked David, in surprise.

"No, not a teenty word. An' don't you look at me. If you do, Old Bandy Legs'll come after you."

"You said he was dead," cried David in a fearful whisper, and crouching tight to Joel and gripping him with both arms. "O dear me!"

"So he is; but he'll catch you if you say a single word. Now go to sleep, an' when I tell you to come with me to-morrow, you must start just as quick as scat."

"I shall take a basket for the green flowers," said Davie, trying not to think of "Old Bandy Legs."

"No, you mustn't; you can bring 'em down in your arms."

"I can't bring many," said little David, swallowing hard. "I can't bring many, Joe, an' Polly'll want some in her garden."

"Well, old Bandy Legs won't let you get

any, if you don't stop," said Joel, crossly, "so there now!" and he rolled off to the edge of the old straw bed, and in two minutes was fast asleep, leaving little Davie peering up at the rafters to watch for the first streak of light, determined to get as many green flowers as he possibly could for Polly's garden.

"I'll twist up a birch-bark basket, to bring 'em down in," he decided. And the first thing either of them knew, there was Polly shaking their arms and laughing. "You lazy little things, you — get up! I've been calling and calling and calling you to breakfast."

Joel and David flew up into the middle of the bed.

"Joe was teasing all night for a drink of water," said Ben, as Polly ran down into the kitchen. "An' I was just going to get up and fetch him some, when he tumbled to sleep again."

"Dear me," said Polly, rushing at her work; "well, I'll keep their porridge warm. Now, Phronsie, you can't help me about these dishes."

"I'm just as big since yesterday," said Phronsie, standing up on her tiptoes to turn an injured face to Polly. "See, Polly."

"So you are," said Polly, bursting into a laugh. "Well, I tell you, Pet, what you might do that would help me more."

"More than to wash the dishes, Polly?" cried Phronsie, tumbling down from her tiptoes. "Oh, do tell me, Polly!" And she ran up to her, and seized Polly's check apron with both fat little hands.

"Why, you see I can't do the dishes, all of 'em, till the boys get through their breakfast," said Polly, with a sober face, looking at the old clock, as she thought of the seams on the sacks she was going to fly at as soon as the work was done in the kitchen. How nice it was that Mamsie had promised she might try this very morning while Mrs. Pepper was down at the parsonage, mending the minister's study carpet. "Now I guess the money'll begin to come in, and Mamsie won't have to work so hard," thought Polly over and over, and her heart beat merrily, and the color flew over her cheek.

"Tell me, Polly," begged little Phronsie, holding the apron tight.

"Well, now, Pet, there's a snarl of thread in the work-basket. Don't you remember, the spool rolled under the table, and nobody saw

it go, and the boys kicked it up and made it into a mess, an' Mamsie put it into the little bag, an' I was to pick it out when I got time? If you only could do that, Phronsie, just think how it would help."

Phronsie gave a long sigh. She dropped the apron, and folded her hands. "Would it help so very much, Polly?" she asked.

"Ever an' ever so much," said Polly. "You needn't do but a little now, an' some other day p'raps you could do some more."

"I'm going to do it all," said Phronsie, shaking her yellow head determinedly. So she got her little wooden chair from against the wall, and set it in the middle of the kitchen floor, and then brought the little cotton bag out of the old work-basket. "I shall do it all this very one minute," she declared softly, as she sat down and drew out the snarl of thread.

"Now, boys," called Polly, as she took one look at her, and just stopped to drop a kiss on the yellow hair, "you must just come downstairs this very minute. If you don't, you can't have any breakfast."

"Coming," sang Joel, and presently down he tumbled, two steps at a time, pulling on his jacket as he went.

"Such a long time to stay abed," reproved Polly; "just think of it, it's after seven o'clock, Joel Pepper, and Mamsie's been gone half an hour!"

"An' I'm working," said Phronsie, twitching at the end of the thread with an important air. "I'm going to pick out the whole of this, I am, for Mamsie. See, Joey!" She held up the snarl, and away the spool raced, as if glad to get off once more.

"Hoh!" said Joel, "you're making it worse'n ever, Phron."

"No, I'm not," cried Phronsie, clutching the snarl with both little fists. "Oh, no, I'm not; am I, Polly?" And the big tears began to race over her round cheeks.

"No," said Polly. "Oh, for shame, Joel, to make Phronsie cry!"

"I didn't make her cry," denied Joel, stoutly, his face working badly. "I'll get the spool— I'll get the spool. See, Polly, here 'tis," and he dived under the table, and came up bright and shining with it in his hand.

"There now, Phronsie; see, Joel's got it for you," said Polly, beaming at him. "Now, Pet, I'll tell you what, let's put Mamsie's basket on

the floor, and old Mr. Spool in it. There, Joey, drop him in, then he can't run away again. Now, then!"

"Mr. Spool can't run away again," smiled Phronsie through her tears, and leaning out of her little wooden chair to see Joel drop the spool in. "That's nice, Polly, isn't it? Now he can't run away again," she hummed.

"Indeed, it is," sang Polly, delighted; "he's fast now, so fly at your snarl, Pet, Mamsie'll be so pleased to think you've picked out some of it."

"I'm going to pick it all out," declared Phronsie in a tone of determination. And wiping off the tears on the back of her fat little hand, she set to work, humming away again to herself.

"Now, whatever keeps David!" cried Polly, dishing out Joel's mush from the kettle on the stove, and setting the bowl on the table.

"He's coming," said Joel, hastily. "O dear me, I wish we ever had anything, Polly Pepper, but mush and molasses for breakfast!"

"Some people don't have anything half as good," said Polly, starting for the stairs.

"What don't they have?" asked Joel in alarm, as he watched her go.

"Oh, I don't know; different things. Da-*vid!*" she called.

"You said they didn't have things half as good," said Joel, stopping with a spoonful of porridge halfway to his mouth. "So you know what they are, now, Polly Pepper."

"Oh, well, they don't. Plenty and plenty of people don't get near as good things as we have every day for breakfast."

"What are they, the things the plenty and plenty of people get?" persisted Joel, beginning on his breakfast comfortably, since Polly was going to talk.

"Oh — let me see," said Polly, pausing at the foot of the stairs. "Old bread, for one thing."

"Is it mouldy?" asked Joel.

"Um — yes, I s'pose so," answered Polly, wrinkling up her face. "Eat your own breakfast, Joe, and not stop to think of what other people have. Da-*vid!*"

"You said 'things,'" said Joel, severely, "and you only told me mouldy old bread, Polly Pepper! What else?"

"O dear, I don't know."

"You *said*—"

"I mean — well, cold potatoes, for one thing. I s'pose most everybody has potatoes. Now eat your breakfast, Joey Pepper. Those are things. Eat your breakfast this minute!"

When Polly spoke in that tone, the three little Peppers knew they must obey. Joel ducked his head over his bowl of mush, and began to hurry the spoonfuls as fast as he could into his mouth.

"I must go up and see what is the matter with David," said Polly, preparing to run up the stairs. Just at this moment he appeared coming slowly down. "Oh, here you are!" cried Polly, brightly, running over to the old stove to dish out his bowl of mush. "Now, Davie, fly at your breakfast, 'cause I've got to sew all the morning just as hard as ever I can."

III

DEACON BROWN'S NAIL PILE

"NOW, boys," said Polly, as Joel pushed back his chair, "I want you to help me, that is, as soon as Davie has finished his breakfast."

"Oh, that's too bad," grumbled Joel, loudly, "when we got all our kindlings chopped yesterday, an' there ain't anything else to do. You know you said we could play to-day, Polly Pepper!"

"I didn't say all day; but of course you can," replied Polly, with a fine scorn, "if you don't *want* to help, Joel. I'm sure the little brown house can get along without a boy who isn't glad to make it as nice as he possibly can."

The idea of the little brown house getting along without him made Joel aghast at once, and he stood quite still. Davie laid down his spoon, and got out of his chair quickly.

"What is it, Polly?" he cried, the pink color all over his cheek.

"Dear me!" cried Polly, merrily, "the very idea of a boy trying to help who hasn't finished his breakfast. Go back and eat every bit of that mush and molasses, Davie dear; then, says I, we'll see what you can do."

"I'll be through in just a minute, Polly." David ran back and clambered into his chair, plying his spoon so fast that Polly cried in dismay, "Oh, Davie, you'll choke yourself!"

"No, I won't," said Davie, with a very red face, and swallowing hard, "it's all slipping down. There, see, Polly. I'm all through; truly I am." He got out of his chair again, and ran up to her.

"So you are," said Polly, glancing approvingly at the bare bowl. "Well now, I'll tell you, Davie, what you can do. You know that pile of old nails that Deacon Brown said Ben might have? Well, 'tisn't nice, you know, to play all day, so you may pick over some of 'em, and get the good ones out. Ben will be so surprised, even if you don't get but a few ready."

"I'm going to work all the morning at 'em," declared little Davie, gladly, hopping off toward the door.

"No, I don't want you to work but a little

while," said Polly, decisively, and picking up the breakfast dishes to wash. "You can have most all to-day to play in. And then some other day, when there isn't any other work to do, you can pick over some more; and pretty soon, before you know it, they'll all be done, and Ben'll be so surprised, for they'll be ready when he wants to mend the woodshed."

"I don't want to pick over any crooked old nails," proclaimed Joel, loudly, and knocking his heels against the pantry door. "I sh'd think Deacon Brown might have given us some good ones."

"For shame, Joel!" said Polly, hurrying across the floor with the pile of dishes; "it's fine of him to give us these. And there are lots of good ones amongst 'em."

"You told me not to say 'lots,' the other day," said Joel, with a sharp look out of his black eyes to see if Polly would relent.

"So I did," she cried, and the color flew over her cheek. "Dear me, it is so hard not to say things that you don't like to hear other people say."

"Well, I don't want to pick over old rusty nails," said Joel, ignoring this remark, "and it's

real mean, Polly Pepper, to make me, when I want to go and play!" And he kicked his heels worse than ever.

"I don't make you," said Polly, pouring the hot water into the dish-pan and dashing in the soap, "but I shouldn't think it was nice to go out to play right after breakfast. You might work an hour, and then you'd enjoy the play all the better."

"I'd enjoy the play now. And a whole hour, too!" cried Joel, in a dudgeon. "Why, Polly Pepper! a whole hour!"

"That's right, Davie," said Polly, smiling brightly at him, as the little fellow ran out into the woodshed. Then she began to sing, without looking at Joel.

"A whole hour," shouted Joel. But Polly kept a cold shoulder toward him, running up and down in a merry song till a little bird outside the window trilled away as hard as he could, to keep her company.

"A whole hour —" Joel ran up and pulled her dress. "It's as mean as it can be to make me work a whole hour, Polly Pepper!"

"Chee — chee — chee," called the little bird, and away Polly sang, splashing the dishes up

and down in the hot soap-suds, till the old kitchen seemed full of merry bustle. Joel regarded her closely for two or three minutes, and then went slowly out.

David was up on top of the wood bin in the shed, and tugging at the box of nails that Ben had put on one of the beams.

"I can't get it down," he said. "Come help me, Joel, do."

But Joel kicked his feet on the woodshed floor. So little David gave another pull at the box, wavered, and clutched wildly at the air, and before Joel could speak, came tumbling down, and after him, the heavy box, spilling the nails as it fell. He lay quite still, and Joel only stopped to take one look.

"Oh, Polly, Dave's killed, I guess," he screamed, rushing into the kitchen, his face working fearfully.

Polly stopped her song in mid-air, and turned quite white. "Oh, no, I guess not," she said with a gasp, as she saw his face. Then she remembered Phronsie. "Come out here, Joe," and she gently pushed him out into the little entry.

"I guess I'll go, too," said Phronsie, who had

been humming a soft refrain to Polly's song, and laying down the snarl carefully in Mamsie's big work-basket she went softly out after them.

"Now, Joel," Polly was saying out of white lips, "don't you scream. Think of Phronsie, and —"

"What is it, Polly?" asked Phronsie's soft voice.

"O dear me! What shall I do!" Polly turned. "Phronsie dear, you mustn't come now." Joel had sunk down and covered his face with his hands, trying not to scream. "Go right back to your chair, Polly says so. Be a good girl, Pet." She looked straight into the blue eyes wide with astonishment at being sent back.

"Please let me, Polly," begged the little girl.

"No," said Polly, firmly, "Mamsie wouldn't like it. Go back, Phronsie, and shut the door."

Phronsie turned without a word and went slowly back, and as Polly seized Joel's hand and sped into the woodshed, they could hear the kitchen door shut, and knew that she had gone back to her chair.

When Polly and Joel reached little David, Joel was beyond words, and he fell down and

flung his arms around the little figure. Davie stirred and moaned. "Help me lift him up, Joe," cried Polly, hoarsely.

"I couldn't get the nails," said David, "and then they all spilled. I'm sorry, Polly," and he opened his eyes and looked up into her white face.

When Joel saw that David could speak, he gave a great gasp. "It was my fault," he sobbed.

"Never mind, Davie dear," said Polly, soothingly. "We can pick the nails up."

"I'll pick 'em up," cried Joel, delighted to find something to do, and he sprang up and went scrambling around and sweeping them into a pile with his fingers, while the big tears trailed down his round cheeks.

"See, now," said Polly, trying to speak gayly, "how the old nails have to hop into the box again."

"So they do," said David, with a wan little smile. Then he shut his eyes.

"Run as fast as you can, Joe," said Polly, "and ask Grandma Bascom to come over." Then she lifted Davie and struggled with him to a pile of grain bags in the corner. "I can't

get him into the bedroom till Joel helps me, and besides, I must get Phronsie out of the kitchen first," she thought. "Oh, God! *please* don't let Davie die," she cried deep in her heart.

Joel flew on the wings of the wind, his heart beating like a trip-hammer, over down across the lane to Grandma Bascom's little cottage. Grandma, with a tin pan full of wet corn meal, was just going out to feed her hens, when he dashed up behind her. "Please come!" he shouted, his trembling mouth close to her cap-border. "Polly wants you!"

"Polly's here, now that's nice!" said Grandma, well pleased. "You just wait a minute, and I'll be ready to see her. Come, Biddy-Biddy," she called, and waddling off, she gathered up a handful of the wet corn meal.

"Oh, come *now!*" roared Joe, and seizing her hand, he pulled her back toward the kitchen. "Dear Grandma Bascom, please come; Dave's killed, I guess," and before she knew it, she was halfway to the little brown house, and in a minute or two more there she was before Davie lying on the pile of grain bags, and Polly holding his hand, and fanning him with an old newspaper.

"'PLEASE COME!' HE SHOUTED CLOSE TO HER CAP-BORDER"

"He's all right," said Grandma, with a practised eye; "only just fainted a bit. Now 'tisn't anything to what my son John's Abram did one summer he spent with me. Used to tumble over most every day."

"He fell," said Polly. She could say no more, but pointed up to the beam. Then she found her voice. "The box of nails — I didn't know 'twas up there, see!" and she pointed to them, where Joel had tried to gather them up.

"He fell down from there?" asked Grandma, looking up at the beam.

Polly nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Joel wrung his hands together, and stood quite still.

"In that case," said Grandma, "this boy must go for Dr. Fisher just as soon as he can."

"Run, Joe, as hard as ever you can," gasped Polly.

No need to tell Joel that. Over the fields and across lots he ran like a deer, scaling stone walls in a flash, only to reach the doctor's house to be told that he was away twenty miles into the country. Then Joel sat down on the grass by the roadside, and burying his face in his hands, cried as if his heart would break.

He didn't mind that a pair of spirited black horses were coming down the road, the bright horses all a-jingle, and the carriage all a-bloom with gay colors, and merry with cheery voices.

"What's the matter?" called somebody to him, but he cried on as hard as he could.

Then his little shoulder in his homespun jacket was shaken smartly. "See here, my boy, either you tell me what you're screaming for, or I'll pick you up and carry you off."

Joel looked up, the streams of tears making muddy paths along his face, where he had rubbed it with his grimy hands. "Dave's killed," he burst out, "and the — the doctor's gone away!"

"Come on." It was a kind face that was over him, and in a minute Joel felt himself lifted by a pair of strong arms that presently tossed him into the carriage, in amongst the occupants, while the owner of the arms jumped in beside him. "Do you know the way home?" he asked.

"Of course," said Joel; "it's the little brown house —" then he began to cry again.

"See here, my lad, look at me." Joel rolled

his eyes up at the man, the rest of the people keeping quite still to listen. "You are a brave boy, I know. Now I'm a doctor, and if you'll just take me to your house, I'll have a look at that Dave of yours. Which way?"

Joel sat bolt upright as well as he could, being crammed in between a big fat man and his kind friend, and directed this way and that way, his tears all gone, and before any one could hardly think twice, the pair of black horses and the jingling harness and big carriage had stopped before the little brown house, and the doctor was springing over the stepping-stones in such a lively fashion that Joel had to run to keep up with him, until there they were, with Grandma Bascom waddling around in search of some herbs that were drying in the corner of the woodshed, and Polly still holding David's hand as he lay on the pile of grain bags. And in five minutes the new doctor had all the examination made, and Davie was sitting up, his head on Polly's shoulder; and no bones were broken, and all the trouble was the fright produced by the shock of the fall. And the color flew back into Polly's cheek, and Grandma Bascom kept saying, "Praise the Lord—and who be ye, anyway?"

bobbing her cap-border at the new doctor. And he laughed and didn't tell her.

But he did tell some funny stories. And little Davie laughed; and when they saw that, they all laughed, and the people out in the carriage said, "Just like Dr. Herman," and one tall girl, with her hat all covered with red roses, said, "Uncle John is always doing such queer things. I do wish he would hurry and come. It is too bad to have our driving tour interrupted like that." And pretty soon down the stepping-stones he came, as light and quick as could be, Grandma Bascom lifting both hands and calling after him, "Well, you're an angel of the Lord, anyway," and the new doctor was laughing. But he had stopped to look into Polly's brown eyes. "Don't worry, little girl, he's all right," he said.

Joel squeezed past them through the doorway, and ran after him.

"Please stop just a minute," he begged.

"Hey?" said the doctor, turning his foot on the step. The tall girl in the hat with big red roses looked impatient enough, and beat her foot on the carriage floor, but Joel kept on.

"I like you," he burst out, "ever'n ever so much."

The doctor put one hand on Joel's stubby black hair, and turned his grimy face up. "You've got to be a man," he said; "now look out for it while you're a boy. I guess you'll do." He jumped into the carriage and drove the black pair of horses off at a smart gait down the road, while Joel stood on the roadside grass to see him go.

IV

THE MUFFIN MAN AND THE TRAMP

SO when the time came that was to bring Mamsie home that night, tired, but happy to fold her baby to her heart, for Phronsie always climbed into her lap to untie her bonnet-strings, there was David, running around brisk as a bee, his cheeks pink as a rose, and Joel, who had stuck to the old box of nails all day, despite Polly's pleadings to stop and rest, gave a shout that the last was done, and stretched his tired legs. Then he gave a hop and skip and jump around and around the grass before the little brown house.

"Whickets! that feels good!" he cried, stopping for a long breath by the old green door; then away again, kicking up his heels like a colt.

"He's done 'em almost every one," said Davie, mournfully, standing on the doorstone to see him go; "he wouldn't let me help only a teenty bit, and he's so tired, Polly."

"Joel wanted to do 'em, Davie dear," said Polly, coming to the door, on hearing that, and

giving him a loving little pat. "I know all about it, why he wanted to do it" — for Joel had told her the whole story — "and Mamsie'll be glad he did it. How I wish she'd come!" peering down the dusty road.

"How I wish she'd come!" echoed Phronsie, poking her head in between Polly's gown and the door jamb.

"Dear me," cried Polly, whirling around, "are you there, Pet? Well, Mamsie's coming pretty soon. I think I see — No, 'tisn't," as David started to scamper over the stepping-stones — "it's a man turning the road. Anyway, she'll be here before we hardly know it, I guess. Now let's play something, and that'll make the time go faster."

"Oh, hooray!" cried little Davie, and, "Hooray!" piped Phronsie. "*Joel — Joel!*" screamed David; and Phronsie clapped her hands and screamed too, and Polly laughed and called as hard as she could, for Joel, imagining himself a gay trotting horse, was slapping his legs with a switch, and careering around the back of the little brown house in a great state of excitement. Now hearing the calls, he came whooping around, making all the noise he possibly

could, so there was a perfectly dreadful din, and no wonder that the man Polly had seen turning the road came nearer without any one noticing him.

He thought it was so convenient for him that all the children in the house should be out in the front yard, that perhaps he had better hop over the stone wall and go quietly in at the back door; for really he was very hungry, and there must be as much as a piece of bread, although the little brown house didn't look as if it held much meat and pie and cake. So over the wall he went, and slunk in through the tall grass, just as Polly was marshalling her forces on the greensward in front and saying, "Now, children, what shall we play?"

"Tag — tag!" screamed Joel, crowding up in front. "Now begin, Polly, do, and let me be it."

"I'd rather have the Muffin Man," said Davie, wistfully.

"Muffin — Man — Muffin — Man," echoed Phronsie, beating her small hands. "Oh, Polly, please do let us have the Muffin Man," she cried, her yellow hair flying over her flushed face as she hopped up and down. "Please, Polly!"

"Pshaw!" Joel exclaimed, contemptuously, "that old Muffin Man, he's no fun. I say 'Tag.' Do begin, Polly," he pulled her sleeve impatiently.

"The Muffin Man is so very nice," said Davie, reflectively, "and we haven't played it in *so* long."

"That old—" began Joel, crossly. Then he caught Polly's eye. "All right, Dave," he cried. "Go on, Polly. And let Dave be the Muffin Man, do, Polly."

Polly shot him a beaming glance. "Now that's nice," and she took Phronsie's hand, who was so overcome with delight she could not stand still, but was engaged in making a cheese, and tumbling over in a heap on the grass. "Come on, Pet," and Polly pulled her up, "don't you see the Muffin Man is waiting for us?" for there was David standing off at the end of the grass-plot, as stiff as a stick, and most dignified, all ready to receive his visitors.

It was after the merry line was dancing back into place that Joel happened to glance up at the window of the kitchen. And as quick as a shot he dropped Polly's hand and skipped off

on the tips of his toes over the grass and around the back of the house.

"Dear me!" cried Polly, "whatever can have happened to Joel?"

"Do come on, Polly," begged Phronsie, pulling at her other hand, and lifting her flushed face pleadingly, "and let us see the Muffin Man once more."

"So we will, dear," said Polly. "Now then!" So they danced off gayly. "We all know the Muffin Man — the Muffin Man — the Muffin Man. We all know the Muffin Man, that lives in Crumpet Lane."

Meantime, Joel rushed in over the back doorstep and into the kitchen before the man he had seen through the kitchen window could hear him and turn away from the old cupboard. When he did, he said something that wouldn't have sounded nice had Joel stopped to hear it. As it was, he bounded in. "What are you doing in our house?" he cried, doubling up his fists. "Hey?" said the man. He wasn't very nice to look at either, and he peered over and around Joel's sturdy figure, to see if more of the children were coming after. When he saw that Joel was alone, and could hear the gay voices out on the

grass-plot, he looked perfectly wicked, and he laughed as he pointed a long and dirty hand at him.

"You scream, or stir from your tracks, and I'll make mincemeat of you!" he hissed.

"I ain't a-goin' to scream," declared Joel, scornfully, "an' I'm goin' to drive you out of our house." With that he dashed at the man with both small brown fists well doubled up, pommelling right and left, and butting his stubby black head into the stranger's waistcoat. And the next minute he was caught in the long hands and tossed with a thump to the old kitchen floor, and the wicked eyes were over him as he lay there panting.

"What did I tell you!" cried the man. "Now I'm going to make mincemeat of you."

"We all know the Muffin Man that lives in Crumpet Lane," sang Polly and Phronsie merrily, out on the grass-plot, as they danced away.

"Where *is* Joel?" cried Polly, as they stopped to take breath.

"Just once more," begged Phronsie, pulling her hand; "please, Polly." So down to see the Muffin Man again they danced.

Meantime, Joel was tied up tight and fast with

the clothes-line to the table leg, and in order that he should not use his tongue, Seraphina's clothes, where Phronsie had thrown her on the floor, were torn off and crammed into his mouth.

"Now I guess you'll keep still," said the man, turning back to the cupboard with a grin; "and as long as those youngsters are at their noise out there, I'm safe enough," and he pulled out Polly's bread she had just baked that day, done up in a clean old towel.

"Humph!" as he thrust his tousled head into the cupboard, and searched for butter, and ran his dirty hands all over the clean, bare shelves — "well, this will keep me from starving." So he rolled the towel as tightly as he could over the bread, and slouched off, shaking his fist at Joel with a parting scowl.

"Now, Phronsie, I can't play another single time," said Polly. "I must see where Joel is." So she dropped the fat little hand and raced off, the other children after her.

"Joel — Joel —" they all cried, and just then Mamsie was coming down the road — oh! so tired, as she had had to stay later than usual, for the Conference was to meet at the minister's house next day, and besides the study carpet to be put

down, there were ever and ever so many things to be done. But she had an extra quarter of a dollar in her pocket, and Polly was to run over after the Conference dinner and get a basket of the eatables. "If they leave any," Miss Jerusha, the minister's sister, had said grimly, "which isn't very likely. I've heard 'em preach often enough of starved souls. La! 'tisn't a circumstance to the starved bodies they bring along to Conference." So Mrs. Pepper was turning in at the dooryard of the little brown house in a happy frame of mind, when she heard a babel of voices, and Phronsie's little shrill voice above them all.

"Goodness me, the house must be afire!" she exclaimed, hurrying over the grass and in at the door. There was Joel, tied hand and foot, his black eyes blazing, while he was talking as fast as he could rattle, and Polly was untying the clothes-line, little Davie getting in the way, with trembling fingers, while Phronsie stood still and screamed.

"He's got all our bread!" shouted Joel. "Oh, Mamsie!" Phronsie turned and saw Mrs. Pepper, and ran to her with outstretched arms.

"Whatever in all this world," exclaimed Mother Pepper, grasping her baby tightly. "There — there — Phronsie, don't cry, Mammy's here."

"Oh, Mamsie — Mamsie!" mourned Polly, tugging at the knots in the clothes-line. Davie scuttled over to Mother Pepper and tried to get within her arms, too.

"Our bread!" screamed Joel, in a rage, and kicking at the knots. "Let me up! I'm going after him. He's got it all out of the cupboard, I tell you!"

"Joel," said Mrs. Pepper, kneeling down by him, with Phronsie by her side, and putting both arms around his struggling figure, "Mother doesn't care about the bread; she's got you safe."

Joel snuggled up close to her. "I couldn't help his gettin' it," he sniffled, "Mamsie, I couldn't." Then he broke out into a loud sob.

"Mother knows you couldn't," said Mrs. Pepper, and she shivered as she thought of what might have been. "You're my brave boy. But you mustn't go after him, nor out of the house."

"Oh, Mammy!" exclaimed Joel, lifting up

his head, his tears all gone. "I can catch him." He gave an impatient pull at the knots.

"Take care, Joe," cried Polly, "you're pulling 'em tighter. Oh, Mammy, let us all go after him," she begged with flashing eyes. "We can catch the bad wicked man."

"No," said Mrs. Pepper, firmly, "not a single one of you must stir out of this house unless I tell you. And as for bread, why, we can do without it so long as Joel is safe."

"Phooh!" said Joel, "he didn't hurt me any," just as Polly got the last knot out that tied his arms. Then he set to work to help her get his legs free. And in a trice he jumped to his feet and ran to the window.

"Oh, Mamsie," he teased, craning his neck to look up and down the road, "do let me go. I can get some sticks in the woodshed, and I guess I can scare him then."

"All of us," pleaded Polly, hurrying to Mrs. Pepper; "just think, Mamsie, with big sticks. Do let us."

But Mother Pepper shook her head. "We'll all go over to Grandma Bascom's and see if he went there. Then Ben'll be home, and he

can run over and tell Deacon Brown. He'll know how to catch the thief."

"I'm goin' with Ben," announced Joel, decidedly, and coming into the middle of the kitchen with a bound. "He's my thief. An' I'm goin' with Mr. Brown to catch him. So there!"

Mrs. Pepper shivered again, but smiled at Phronsie, who clutched her tightly with her little arms around the neck. "Well, I declare!" she said with a cheery laugh, "aren't you going to untie Mother's bonnet-strings, Baby?"

"Yes, Phronsie," said Polly, with another little laugh, "so you ought to. I declare, we're all so excited we don't know what to do. I'm going to make your tea, Mamsie," and she spun off to the old stove.

Mrs. Pepper smiled at her approvingly. "I won't wait for that now; we ought to get over and see how Grandma Bascom is. I don't believe he went there, but we'll see."

"I forgot all about her," said Polly, in a shamefaced way. "I'll run down the lane and see. You don't need to come, Mamsie. We three will go."

"I'm goin'. I'm goin'," screamed Joel, rushing for the door.

"Joel," called his mother, "come here." Joel slowly retraced his steps.

"Remember one thing. You stay with Polly, and do just as she says. And now, children, hurry along. And if you see the man, you call me." And Mrs. Pepper went to the door, and, with Phronsie in her arms, watched them scramble down the lane, and up to Grandma's little cottage.

But Grandma Bascom hadn't seen anybody pass that way, and wasn't a bit afraid. There she sat, drinking her bowl of tea out under the lilac bushes.

"Run in an' get some pep'mint drops out o' the cupboard," she said sociably, "they're in the big green dish. Be careful of it, for it's cracked."

"We can't," said Polly, "Mamsie wants us to come right home."

Joel's mouth watered. "'Twon't take but a minute, Polly," he said.

"No, Joe, we mustn't," said Polly, firmly. "Good-by, Grandma. Now, let's run, boys, as fast as we can, home to Mamsie, and see which will get there first."

V

ON BANDY LEG MOUNTAIN

AND so Joel finally went to the cave alone. But not before a good many weeks, for the two boys didn't get play-day again in a long while. There was work to do picking rocks for the neighboring farmers; and then came potato-planting time when they could help Ben as he worked for Deacon Brown, who always paid them well in potatoes that kept them through the winter. And, dear me, there was always wood to pick up and split, Ben doing the heaviest part of the chopping; and errands down to the store for Indian meal and molasses and flour, and to fetch and carry back the coats and sacks that Mamsie was always sewing up. So at it they kept all the pleasant days. And, of course, on the rainy days no one could think of getting off to the woods. So presently Joel almost forgot about wanting to go, until one day when Polly broke out, "Now, boys, you can play a good while to-day; your work's all done up."

Joel twitched Davie's arm and hauled him out to the woodpile behind the shed. "Now come on, Dave, let's go to old Bandy Leg Mountain."

"No, I don't want to. I'm never goin' there," said Davie, shrinking back.

"Not after the flowers?" said Joel, aghast at that.

David looked longingly off to the tip of the mountain overhanging Badgertown.

"N-no," he said slowly.

"You see," said Joel, wheedlingly, "there must be such a very great lot up there, and nobody to pick 'em, Dave."

Davie turned his blue eyes full of delight: "I might go a little way; but I'm not going to the cave; only just after the flowers — the green ones and the others."

"All right," said Joel, carelessly, thinking that after Davie got started he could persuade him to keep on. "Now, you wait here till I get my gun."

Joel's gun was an old willow branch out of which he had knocked the pith; then he would put in round pebbles, when he wanted to use it, and punch them out suddenly with another

stick, screaming out at the same time, "Look out, my gun's going off. *Bang!*"

So he ran off nimbly and got his gun from the corner of the woodshed, where he had hidden it, and then in to Polly in the kitchen.

"Give us somethin' to eat, Polly, please. Dave an' me."

"You can get some bread in the tin pail in the provision room, Joe," she said, without looking up. She was trying to sew up a long seam in one of the coats Mother Pepper was making for Mr. Atkins, and it bothered her dreadfully, for it wouldn't look like Mamsie's, try as she would. And she had picked it out three times, and was just threading her needle to begin again, when Joel rushed in.

"Why, you've only been through breakfast a little while," she said quickly. "Dear me, Joe, seems to me you're always hungry."

"How I wish 'twas gingerbread!" cried Joel, tumbling over the rickety steps in a trice. "Polly, why don't we ever have any?" he called back, twitching off the cover of the pail. It fell to the floor and rattled off, making a great noise.

"Stop banging that pail, Joe," called Polly, in

a sharp little voice, and twisting the end of the thread tighter. "Dear me, this hateful thing won't go in that eye. Go in, you!" with a push that sent the thread way beyond the needle.

"I ain't bangin' the pail," contradicted Joel, in a loud, injured voice; "the old thing fell down. 'Twarn't my fault." And he ran noisily across the provision room to pick it up.

"Well, set it on tight," said Polly, "and you're a very naughty boy, Joel, and always making a fuss over the bread pail."

Joel didn't hear her, as he was busily engaged in cramming the cover on the pail, and in a minute or two he came up with his pockets full of dry bread, and his chubby face beaming with satisfaction.

Polly tried again, without avail, to thread her needle, and at last, as he ran out with a good whoop, she laid it down and put her head back against Mamsie's big chair in which she was sitting. "O dear," she sighed, "how I wish I could go off to-day and play just once! How good it must be in the woods!"

"Don't you suppose you'll go when you are a big woman?" asked Phronsie, laying down

Seraphina, where she sat on the floor, and regarding her gravely. "Ever, Polly?"

"O dear me, yes," said Polly, twitching up her head again, and picking up the needle and thread. "And I'm a bad, naughty girl, Phronsie, to fret," she added, her ill-humor flying. "There, now you've concluded to go in, have you?" this to the eye of the needle.

"You're never bad, Polly," said Phronsie, taking up Seraphina once more, feeling that everything was right, as she had seen Polly smile, and beginning to tie on a remarkable bonnet upside down.

"Yes I am, Pet, often and often," said Polly, with very red cheeks, "and I ought to be put in the corner."

"Oh, Polly, — put in the corner!" cried Phronsie, in a tone of horror. "Why, you couldn't be. You're Polly!"

"Well, I need it," said Polly, shaking her brown head, while the needle flew in and out merrily. Suddenly she laid it down. "I must go out and tell Joel I'm sorry. I was cross to him. I'll be back in a minute," and she sped off.

When she came back she looked very sober

"They've gone down to the brook, I suppose," glancing at the clock. "Well, I'll tell Joe just as soon as he gets home," and slipping into the big chair again, she set to work, and presently the old kitchen was very quiet, except for the little song that Phronsie was crooning to Seraphina. At last this stopped, and Polly, looking off from her work, saw that Phronsie had fallen over on the floor, and was fast asleep.

"Poor thing!" exclaimed Polly, "she wants her nap." So she took her up, and carried her into the bedroom, and laid her on the big four-poster, and came out and shut the door. "Now I do believe I'll have time to finish these two seams, if I fly at 'em," she said joyfully. "Then, says I, this old coat's done, and Mamsie can send the bundle back to-night when she gets home" — for Mrs. Pepper was away helping one of the village housekeepers to make her supply of soft soap. Many and many such an odd job did Mother Pepper get, for which she was thankful enough, as it helped her to eke out her scanty pittance.

Joel and David trotted on as fast as possible, by many a short cut through the woods, till they reached the foot of "Bandy Leg Mountain," so

called because the hermit who had lived and died there had short crooked legs. And at last they began to climb up its face, David peering on every side for any chance at spying out the wonderful flowers.

"I most b'lieve there aren't any," at last he said, his feet beginning to drag.

"Come on," cried Joel, way ahead. "Hoh! what you stoppin' down there for? Of course you won't find any until you get up nearer the top. Come on!" and he disappeared in a thick clump of undergrowth.

"Where are you, Joel?" cried Davie. He was now too frightened to move, and he was sure he heard a lion roar, though it was only his heart beating and thumping; so he sat down on the moss and pine needles, and waited. Joel would surely come back. Meantime a little bird came up and perched on the branch above his head, and sang to him, so he felt less lonely.

Joel, supposing Davie was close behind him, trudged on and on. "Hooray, we're most there!" he shouted at last. "Come on, Dave," and he turned around. "Why — Dave — Dave!"

"I guess he's just back there," and Joel ran

on, for there was the big hole in the rocks, and perhaps he'd really see a bear! and, O dear! he must have his gun ready. And Joel soon stopped thinking about David, but bounded ahead as fast as he could, and squirmed in through the narrow slit, and wriggled along down toward the end of the cave.

Suddenly a very funny noise struck his ear; it wasn't a bit like a bear, nor even a woodchuck, for they couldn't talk. And there surely were a number of voices. Joel stopped squirming, and stared with wide eyes into the darkness. It smelt dreadfully in there, so close and hot, and before he could stop it he gave an awful sneeze.

"What's that?" exclaimed one of the voices. Then they whispered, and Joel heard some one say, "We're found out." And another one said a bad word, and laughed, saying nobody'd ever find them there.

"I guess there's lots in there," said Joel, "an' I better go," so he wriggled back out into the light. And he hadn't been there but a minute when something came squirming down along after him. Joel flew into the bushes and peered out between the branches.

"Why, it's the man who stole Polly's bread!" he almost screamed. The man went past the bush, so near that his long dirty fingers could have picked him out in a minute, and then went down the other way, looking around carefully, and whistling away softly to himself, and presently returned to the cave. And as soon as he had gone in again, Joel hopped out of his bush, and ran at a lively pace down the mountain-side, thinking only of meeting David, and then to get Ben and Deacon Brown and a lot of men, "and won't we come back and catch every single one of 'em, then!"

There was David fast asleep under his tree, and the little bird singing to him. "Dave — Dave!" shouted Joel, shaking him hastily, "wake up! The man that stole our bread's up there. The cave's full of 'em. I'm goin' to get Ben, an' catch 'em!"

"I'm goin' — to — get — the — flowers," said little Davie, sitting up straight and blinking. Joel seized his hand and spun him along as fast as he could around the rocks and boulders that now stood in the way.

Ben was at Deacon Blodgett's, and looked up to see Joel and David, hot and panting, rush

into the field. "I'm so tired," said Davie, and sank down; "O dear me, Ben, I'm so tired."

Joel told his story, rattling it off so that Ben had to shake his jacket many times. "Hold on there, Joe," he said, "you haven't seen half that. You've been asleep."

"Come up and see," cried Joel, excitedly. "Oh, Ben, come up and see."

"What's all this?" asked Farmer Blodgett, drawing near. So Ben told it as well as he could for Joel, who wanted to go over every word again, and at last they made him understand.

"Now that boy," said Mr. Blodgett, shifting his quid of tobacco into the other cheek, "bein's he's a Pepper, knows what he's a-talkin' of. I'm of th' opinion pretty strong that I'm a-goin' up Bandy Leg."

"Oh, good! Mr. Blodgett," exclaimed Joel, hopping up and down in his delight. "Do please hurry this minute and come on."

"Bein's I've lost more hens and chickens the last two weeks than I ever have in my life before, and only yest'day wife had a hull pan o' doughnuts took off from the back steps where she'd set 'em to cool, why I'm of the

opinion pretty strong that Bandy Leg Mountain will bear lookin' into. So I'll call Peter an' Jed, an' we'll hoof it up there right away."

"Oh, Mr. Blodgett, do hurry," begged Joel, "and come." And he began to dance off impatiently.

"Hold on!" cried the farmer, turning back, "you ain't goin'."

Joel stood absolutely still. "Not going!"

"Th' idee o' takin' a leetle chap like you," laughed Deacon Blodgett. "Why, I couldn't look your Ma in the face, Joel Pepper, ef I sh'd do sech a thing."

Joel scanned Ben's face.

"I'm sorry, Joe," said Ben, "but Mamsie wouldn't like it, you know."

Joel gave a howl. "They're mine. And he's my man who stole our bread; an' they all b'long to me, for I found 'em." He kept screaming on.

"Mercy me!" cried Ben, shaking his arm, "stop screaming so, Joe, you're scaring all Mr. Blodgett's men. They'll think you're half killed. See 'em running here."

"I don't have to go after 'em, to call 'em, s'long as you yell like that," observed Farmer Blodgett, grimly.

"An' they all b'long to me, every single one of 'em," screamed Joel, harder than ever, "so there! an' Mamsie'd let me," he added in a fresh burst.

"Well, I can't let you," declared Ben, decidedly, "without she says so; and if we wait here much longer, all those fellows will be slipping off, maybe. They can hear you up there, for all I know, you make such a noise."

"See here," cried Deacon Blodgett, sternly, "Joe Pepper, you stop that noise! Ain't you 'shamed, bein' Mrs. Pepper's boy, to take on so? Now I'll tell you what I'll do. You've done a good thing a-drummin' up those scamps, an' I don't wonder you want to go an' see 'em ketched."

"I want to help catch 'em, and they're mine," said Joel, through his tears.

"Well," — and the farmer smiled grimly, — "I don't wonder, so now I'll tell you what I'll do. Peter shall go along with you home, an' if your Ma says come, he'll bring you after us. So march lively."

"Mother isn't home," said Ben. "She's at Miss Perkins' working, to-day." While Joel screamed shrilly, "Oh, dear-dear-dear, p'r'aps she won't let me go!"

"Then you hadn't ought to want to," said Deacon Blodgett, sternly. "Start lively, now, and see."

But Mrs. Pepper, looking into her boy's eyes, and hearing his story, stood quite still, and Joel's heart went down to his toes.

"I think a boy who can act as bravely as you have, Joe," she said at last, slowly, "ought to go and see the job finished. Mother can trust you. Run along," and Joel's feet twinkled so fast that Peter could hardly see them go.

VI

AB'M'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

THE robbers were caught, and were lodged in the county jail, and all the farmers who had hen-roosts robbed, and the farmers' wives who had their doughnuts stolen, kept coming over to the little brown house or stopping Mrs. Pepper after church on Sunday to thank her for what her boy had done, until it got so that when Joel saw a bonnet coming along the dusty road, or a wagon stop in front, he would run and hide.

"I won't have 'em put their hands on my head and call me good boy," he cried, shaking his black hair viciously. "I'll kick 'em — so there!" So one day, when he caught sight of a wagon just about to stop, he ran, as usual, as fast as he could, off over to Grandma Bascom's.

"Now that's too bad," said a big tall woman, who got out of the wagon and made her way up to the door, "for Mis' Beebe said in partic'ler I was to bring Joel, an' he ain't to home."

"Go and call him, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper. "Come in, won't you, and sit down?"

Phronsie tried to drag forward a chair, while Polly ran out the back door, calling, "Joel — Joel!"

"Bless her heart!" exclaimed the visitor, looking at Phronsie. "No, I can't set; I've got to keep an eye on that horse." As Mr. Beebe, who ran the little shoe shop up in the town, owned a horse that nothing but a whip could make go, this seemed unnecessary. However, Mrs. Pepper only smiled hospitably, while the woman went on.

"You see, I've only jest about come, as 'twere, on from the West, an' bein' my boy's got a birthday, an' him bein' grandson, as you may say, to Mis' Beebe, she thought she'd give him a party."

"Oh, are you Mr. Beebe's daughter?" asked Mrs. Pepper, in perplexity. "I thought the old people hadn't any children."

"No more'n they hain't," said the visitor, leaning composedly against the door jamb and keeping her eye on the horse; "but as you may say, Ab'm's their grandson, for my husband's mother was sister to Mis' Beebe, an' she's dead,

so you see it's next o' kin, an' it comes in handy to call her Grandma."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Pepper.

"Well, an' so Mis' Beebe's goin' to give Ab'm a party. La! she's been a-bakin' doughnuts all this mornin', got up at four o'clock an' begun 'em. I never see such sugary ones. They're sights, I tell you."

Polly now ran in. "I can't find Joel, Mamsie," she said sadly.

"Well, Mis' Beebe said I was to bring him most partic'ler; she'd rather see him than any of the rest o' you. She said, 'Marinthy, be sure to bring that boy who was so brave about them robbers. Tell him I've made some doughnuts special for him.'"

"O dear!" exclaimed Polly, clasping her hands, "whatever can we do, Mamsie, to find him?"

"You must not wait any longer," said Mrs. Pepper, remembering how, the day before, Joel had run down to the brook, and been gone for hours, following along its course, never coming home till dinner-time. "Get Phronsie ready, and Davie and yourself. But I'm sorry for Joey to lose the treat," she said sadly.

"So'm I," said Abram's mother, "an' Mis Beebe'll feel dreadful bad. Well, I'm afraid that horse'll start, so I'll get in, an' you can all come out when you get ready."

Pretty soon Polly emerged from the bedroom with a sad look on her rosy face, and her brown eyes drooped as she led Phronsie along as fresh and sweet as a rose, all ready.

"'Tisn't nice a bit to go without Joel, Mamsie," said Polly, disconsolately.

"You can't help it, Polly," replied her mother, "and it won't do to keep Abram's mother waiting. So go on, and take care of the children, and see that they behave nicely. And don't let Phronsie eat more than one doughnut. And be careful to tie the shawl over her when she comes home."

"I'll remember, Mamsie," said Polly, and wishing there wasn't such a thing in the world as a party, she put Phronsie into the wagon, and climbed up beside her. Davie, with a very sober face at thought of leaving Joel behind, craned his neck and watched for him as long as the little brown house was in sight.

"You see," said Abram's mother, twitching the reins, when at last the old horse decided to start,

"I had to hurry away an' get in. I sh'd a-liked to a' set an' passed the time o' day longer with your Ma, but I didn't darst to. It's dretful to have a horse run. I couldn't never a-catched him in all this world, stout as I be. Land! I hain't run a step for ten years, 'cept last spring I was to Sister Jane's, an' her cow took after me, an' I had to."

"O dear," breathed Phronsie, turning her face up as she sat squeezed in between Abram's mother and Polly, "did he hurt you?"

"Bless your heart!" exclaimed the woman, beaming at her, "no, for he didn't catch me. You see I had on a red shawl, an' the critter didn't like it."

"Oh!" said Phronsie.

"No; sho there, easy, you!" cried Abram's mother, holding the old leather reins as tightly as possible, and bracing back; "I guess he won't run, bein's I'm so strong in my hands. Well, you see Jane she hollered out o' th' window, 'Throw away your shawl, M'rinthy, he'll kill you.'"

"O dear me!" exclaimed Phronsie. "An' did he kill you, Mrs. Big Woman?" she asked anxiously.

"No; why here I be," said Abram's mother, with a hearty laugh. "Well, how could I throw off my shawl an' me a-runnin' so, an' 'twas all pinned across me, an' my brother'd brought it from over seas. So I had to run."

Phronsie sighed, and kept her troubled eyes raised to the big face above her.

"An' the first thing't ever I knew, I went down kerslump into a big compost heap, an'—"

"What's a compost heap?" asked Davie, getting up to stand in the wagon back of them.

"Oh, manure an' sich, all gone to rot," said Abram's mother.

"O dear me!" said Davie.

"An' that cow—'twas a bull, I forgot to tell you, Jane's husban' told me afterwards—he kept right on over my head, couldn't stop, you know, an' he went bang up against a tree on t'other side, an' it knocked him flat."

"Did it hurt him?" asked Phronsie, in a sorry tone.

"I s'pose so," said Abram's mother, "for he didn't know nothin', an' th' men folks came who'd seen me runnin' an' heard Jane hollerin' an' took him off before he came to, which he did after a spell, as lively as a cricket. An'

they dragged me up, more dead'n alive, an' I hain't run a step since."

Phronsie drew a long breath of relief that no one was killed. Davie gazed at Abram's mother in great satisfaction. "Tell us some more," he said.

"An' I might as well have flung off that red shawl," she went on, ignoring his request, "if I could a' got out that pin, for it was all smutched up, fallin' in that mess, an' I couldn't put it on my back. It beats all how you never know what's best to do; but then, says I, you've no call to worry afterwards, if you decide in a hurry. Sho now, go easy, you!" And at last they drew up at Mrs. Beebe's door.

There she stood in the doorway, in a cap with new pink ribbons, and old Mr. Beebe just a little back, smiling and rubbing his hands, and in the little window where the shoes and rubbers and slippers were hanging was a big round face plastered up against the small panes of glass.

"There's Ab'm, now," exclaimed his mother, proudly. "I guess when you see him you'll say there never was sech a boy. Well, I'm glad we're here safe an' sound, an' this horse

hain't run nor nothin'. Now, hop out," — which injunction was not needed.

Good Mrs. Beebe ran her eye over the little bunch of Peppers as they jumped down over the wheel. "Why, where's Joel?" she cried. "In the bottom o' th' wagon, I s'pose," she added, laughing and shaking her fat sides.

"Yes, where's Joel?" cried Mr. Beebe, rubbing his hands together harder than ever. "I want him to tell me all about how he ketched them robbers."

Polly was just going to tell all about Joel, and why he couldn't come, when the big woman shouted out, "They couldn't find him, for he warn't to home."

"Sho, now, that's too bad!" ejaculated Mr. Beebe, dreadfully disappointed. Mrs. Beebe already had Phronsie in her arms, and was whispering to her some of the delights to come. "Well, well, well, come right in, all of you, and make yourselves to home. I'll take care of the horse, Marinthy; go in an' set down."

"I'm sure I'm glad to," said Marinthy, getting over the little steps quickly after the Pepper children, and nearly knocking down David, who came last. "Ab'm, come here an' make your manners," she called.

Ab'm got down from the pile of boxes where he had been looking out of the window, and slouched forward, his finger in his mouth.

"Speak up pretty, now," said his mother, pulling his jacket down with a twitch, and looking at him admiringly; "these children's come to your party. Say how do you do, an' you're glad to see 'em."

"How do you do, an' you're glad to see 'em —"

"Land sakes alive!" cried his mother, with a shake; "hain't you no more manners'n that? Do say it right."

"You told me to say it so," said Ab'm, doggedly.

"No, I didn't," retorted his mother with another shake. The little bunch of Peppers turned quite pale, and scarcely breathed.

"Did anybody ever see sech a boy, an' he that's had no pains spared 'n his bringin' up? Well, he's ten to-day, thank fortune, an' he'll soon be a-takin' care o' himself."

Phronsie crept closer to Polly. "Take me home," she said. "I want my Mammy."

"O dear me," thought Polly, "whatever shall I do! It will make dear Mr. and Mrs. Beebe feel

so badly if I don't stop her. Phronsie," and she drew her off one side of the shop, old Mrs. Beebe having gone into the inner room, "you know Mamsie told us all to be good."

"Yes," said Phronsie, her lips quivering, and the tears beginning to come in her blue eyes.

"Well, it would just about make dear Mrs. Beebe and dear Mr. Beebe sick to have you feel badly and go home."

"Would it?" asked Phronsie, swallowing hard.

"Yes," said Polly, decidedly, "it would. People never go to a party, and then say they must go home."

"Don't they, Polly?" asked the little girl.

"No," said Polly, decidedly, "I never heard of such a thing. And just think, Phronsie Pepper, how Mamsie would look! Oh, you can't mean to be a naughty girl."

"I — won't — be a naughty — girl, Polly," promised Phronsie, battling with her tears, "an' I won't look at the big woman, nor the boy. Then I'll stay."

So Polly kissed her, and pretty soon Mrs. Beebe bustled in, her round face quite red with the exertions she had been making, and Mr. Beebe having seen to his horse, came in rub-

bing his hands worse than ever, saying, "Now, if we only had Joel, we'd be all right."

"Now, my dears," — began Mrs. Beebe. "Why, you haven't laid off your things yet!" to the Peppers.

"No'm," said Polly, "but we will now, thank you, Mrs. Beebe," and she untied Phronsie's sunbonnet and took off the shawl, David putting his cap down on the counter, keeping a sharp, disapproving eye on Ab'm every minute.

"When are you coming for a new pair of shoes?" whispered Mr. Beebe, getting hold of Phronsie and lifting her to his knee.

Phronsie thrust out her little foot. "See," she cried gleefully, forgetting for a moment the big woman and the boy, "dear, nice Mr. Beebe, they're all here." Then she poked out the other foot. "I buttoned 'em up all myself."

"No?" cried Mr. Beebe, greatly delighted; "well, now, when those are worn out, you come and see me again, will you?"

"They aren't ever going to be worn out," said Phronsie, positively, and shaking her head.

"Hoh, hoh!" laughed Ab'm, suddenly finding his tongue, "your shoes ain't never goin' to wear out! Ma, did you hear her?"

Phronsie started and hid her face on Mr. Beebe's fat shoulder. Polly hurried to her side.

"Be still!" cried his mother; "hain't you no manners, an' they're company? Ab'm Bennett, I'm ashamed of ye." With that she leaned over and gave him a box on the ear.

It was perfectly dreadful, and Polly had all she could do to keep from bursting out crying. And what they would have done, no one knows, if Mrs. Beebe hadn't said, "Won't you all walk out into the parlor an' set down to the table? Come, Pa, you lead with Phronsie."

"Ab'm oughter," said his mother; "that's style, seein' th' party's fer his birthday."

"Well, you go first then, Marinthy," said old Mr. Beebe, dryly, "with him, an' Phronsie an' I'll foller on. Now then, my dear." He set her on the floor, and bent his old white head down to smile into her face reassuringly, while her trembling fingers held his hand fast.

"Polly," said little David, as they brought up the rear of the procession, "I am so very much afraid of that boy."

"The party will soon be through," said Polly, encouragingly. "I'm so glad that Joel isn't here, for he'd say something, I'm afraid, if

Ab'm scares Phronsie again," and she gave a sigh of relief.

Oh, the table! There were doughnuts, sure enough, as Mrs. Marinthy had said, "The biggest I ever see, and the sugariest." No wonder good Mrs. Beebe got up at four o'clock to make them! And a great dish of pink and white sticks and cunning little biscuits with real butter on them, and a cake, with little round candies sprinkled all over the top. Was there ever such a beautiful birthday party!

Phronsie, clinging to good Mr. Beebe's hand, thought not, and her glances wandered all up and down in delight, to bring her eyes at last up to Polly's brown ones, when her little face broke into a happy smile. Ab'm was so intent on choosing which of the pink and white sticks he should pick for, that he could think of nothing else, so Mrs. Beebe got them all seated without any further trouble. Old Mr. Beebe was just saying, "Now, if Joel was only here, we'd be all right," when the shop door opened suddenly, and into the little parlor ran Joel, very red in the face.

"Now that's nice enough," cried Mrs. Beebe, getting out of her chair, her pink cap-ribbons

all in a flutter, while old Mr. Beebe exclaimed, with a beaming face, "Well, I declare! ef I ain't glad to see you. Set right down by me."

"No, he'll set here, Pa," said Mrs. Beebe, pushing up the chair next to Ab'm; "there's more room this side." So Joel marched up and got into his seat.

"An' so you thought you'd come," said Mr. Beebe, with a jolly little laugh. "Now we'll have fine times, won't we, Phronsie?" patting her hand. "How'd you git here?"

"I walked," said Joel, who couldn't for his life keep his eyes from the doughnuts, "'cept when I met a man with a load of hay. An' he was so slow I got down again, for I was afraid I'd miss the party."

"Hee, hee, hee!" chuckled Mr. Beebe; "well, wife, do give Joel a doughnut; he must be tired, a-comin' so far."

"Oh, thank you," cried Joel, thrusting out his hand eagerly.

"'Tain't style, where I come from out West, to help the doughnuts first, an' specially when that boy's just come," said Mrs. Marinthy, with a great air.

Joel dropped his doughnut to his plate as if

it had been a hot cake, and leaned over to fasten his black eyes on her big face. "Well, pass the biscuits, do, then," said old Mr. Beebe, good-naturedly; "let's get somethin' a-goin', Ma." So the little biscuits were passed, but Joel did not take one; he still sat regarding Ab'm's mother.

"Ma, Ma," said Ab'm in a loud whisper, and twitching her elbow, "this strange boy's a-lookin' at you all the time. Make him stop, do."

At this Phronsie gave a little cry. "Don't let 'em hurt Joey," she gasped, turning to Mr. Beebe.

"There shan't nothin' hurt Joel, don't you be afraid," he whispered back.

"Hoh, hoh!" cried Ab'm, pointing a big fat finger at her, that might have been cleaner; "hear her now. An' she said her shoes warn't never goin' to wear out. Hoh, hoh!"

"You let our Phronsie alone," screamed Joel, tearing his black eyes off from Mrs. Marinthy's face to fasten them on her son.

"Ow! he pinched me," roared Ab'm, edging suddenly off to his mother.

"I didn't," cried Joel, stoutly; "I did't touch

him a single bit! But he shan't scare Phronsie, or I'll pitch into him. Yes, sir-ree!"

"Joel!" cried Polly, in great distress, across the table.

"Well, he shan't scare Phronsie," cried Joel, "this boy shan't, or I will pitch into him," and his black eyes blazed, and he doubled up his little brown fists.

"Joel," commanded Polly, "do you stop, this very minute," and, "Oh, sir!" looking up at Mr. Beebe, and, "Oh, marm!" and her brown eyes were fixed imploringly on Mrs. Beebe's round countenance, "I do feel so ashamed, and Mamsie will be so sorry. But please will you let us go home?" And poor Polly could say no more.

"An' I sh'd think you'd better go home," said Ab'm's mother, with asperity; "a-comin' to a birthday party and abusin' the boy it's give for. I never see th' like. An' to think how I driv' you clear over here, an' that horse most runnin' away all the time."

Polly got out of her chair and sorrowfully went up to Joel. "We'll sit out in the shop, if you please, dear Mr. and Mrs. Beebe, till you get through the party. And then, if you please, we'd like to go home."

Joel's head dropped, and his little brown fists fell down. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

Mrs. Beebe picked off the biggest pink stick from the pile on the dish and slid it on Joel's plate. "Eat that," she whispered. "Ab'm's goin' home in a week, an' then, says I, you shall come over an' visit with me." And Mr. Beebe looked over at him and nodded his white head, and Joel was quite sure he winked pleasantly at him. But the pink stick and doughnut lay quite untouched on his plate, and after a time, Polly having crept back to her seat, the biscuits had been passed around again, and the grand cake with the candies on top had been cut, the pink and white sticks were divided, and the doughnuts went up and down the table, and lo and behold! the party was over.

"I've had a birthday party," said Ab'm, with great satisfaction, sliding out of his chair with a black look for Joel, and stuffing what he couldn't eat into his pocket.

"You come with me," said Mrs. Beebe to Joel, "and let the others go back into the shop." So he followed her into a little entry, and out of that opened a cupboard.

"Now there's a paper bag up on that shelf,"

said Mrs. Beebe. "You can climb up and git it; that's right. Now, says I." She waddled back to the supper table. "Come here, Joel, my boy, and hold it open there and there." In went the biggest doughnuts that were left, some little biscuits, several pieces of the fine cake, and last of all, three or four pink and white sticks.

"You tell your Ma," said Mrs. Beebe, speaking very soft, "that Mr. Beebe an' me thinks a sight o' you, an' that you're a-comin' out here to spend the day just as soon as Ab'm goes. Now remember."

"Yes'm, I will," said Joel, twisting up his bag. "An' I'll come, Mrs. Beebe, if Mamsie'll let me."

"An' take care the things don't fall out," warned Mrs. Beebe.

Joel gave the bag another twist, and gripped it fast.

"An' I guess Pa's got the horse around all right," said Mrs. Beebe, going out into the shop, "so I s'pose you all must go, though sorry I be to have you." She gave Polly a motherly little pat on the shoulder, and fairly cried over Phronsie.

"Well, you've got to go, I s'pose," she said again, "'cause Pa's a-waitin'; yes, Pa," she called, "they're a-comin'." And presently the little Peppers, except Phronsie, all clambered over the wheel; then Polly and Joel lifted her up, and away they went, Mrs. Beebe watching them off till a turn of the narrow street hid them from view.

"That Ab'm," said Mr. Beebe, after they had gone quite a piece, and glancing back over his shoulder, "well, he ain't reelly no kin to us, thank the Lord, an' they're a-goin' next week. I can tell you one thing, Polly, he an' his Ma don't git inside our house agin."

VII

JOEL GOES A-FISHING

JOEL sat on the back doorstep and kicked his heels disconsolately. Davie was lying down on Mamsie's bed, fast asleep. He was tired out picking rocks all the forenoon, and Polly had shut the door and said he mustn't be waked up. So there he lay, his arm thrown up over his flushed cheeks; and the long hot summer afternoon ahead of Joel, and he must spend it alone.

"All the birds have lots of themselves to play with," grumbled Joel, idly slinging a stone at a pack of chattering young ones who could not contain their pride at being able to fly so finely, but kept screaming every minute, "Look at me. Chee-chee-chee. See-me-chee-chee-chee!"

Now they cocked their little heads and stared down with their black beady eyes at Joel; when they saw it was he, they chirped and twittered worse than ever. "See me. Chee-chee-chee! Look-at-me-chee-chee-chee!"

"Stop it!" cried Joel, crossly, looking up at them; "Davie's abed, an' I haven't any one to play with, an' you have, lots an' lots." Then a smile broke out and ran all over his chubby face, and he flung another stone he had picked off as far as he could into the grass.

The little birds, glad to see him smile, fluttered their wings and flew off, screaming proudly, "See-me-chee-chee-chee!"

"I'm going fishing down to Cherry Brook," said Joel, left alone with not a bird in sight. Even the squirrels seemed to have business at a distance that afternoon; so he hopped off from his stone and ran to get his old tin pail and the remnant of an iron spoon that Polly had given the boys to dig worms with; and very soon he had a good quantity wriggling and squirming away, and he came shouting, flushed and happy, by the window where she sat sewing.

"I'm goin' fishin', Polly," he said, slinging his birch pole over his shoulder.

"All right," said Polly, nodding and smiling away at him. "Sh, Joel, don't make such a noise. You'll wake up Davie."

"Then he could go with me," declared Joel, on the edge of another whoop.

"No, indeed, Mister Joel," said Polly, with a decisive nod of her brown head, "you needn't think it. Davie's legs aren't so strong as yours, and he's all tired out."

"My legs are dreadful strong, Polly," said Joel, well pleased at Polly's words. And he set down his pail of angleworms, and the pole carefully beside it. "See, Polly," and he flopped over suddenly, turning two or three somersaults, to stand still on his head.

"Oh, Joel — Joel!" cried Polly, forgetting all about David, and dropping her work to her lap, "don't. You mustn't do that. Stop it!"

"Pooh! that's nothing," said Joel, wiggling his legs far apart, and peering at her out of his sharp black eyes.

"Joel!" screamed Polly, "get up this minute, and don't you go upside down again! Mamsie wouldn't like it. Get up, I say!"

"Pooh! that's nothing," again declared Joel, slowly flopping over to lie still on the grass. Then he began to slap his legs up and down. "Ain't I dreadful strong, Polly? Ain't I?"

"And your face is dreadfully red," said Polly; "I shouldn't wonder if sometime you burst a

blood vessel in you, if you do that perfectly awful thing."

"How could it burst?" cried Joel. "Tell me, Polly," bringing his legs down quite still to hear the answer. "Tell me, Polly."

"You'd know, I guess," answered Polly. "Don't, Joel, you make me feel as if I sh'd fly to even think of it, and here I ought to be sewing every single minute." Just then the bedroom door opened, and out walked David, dewy-eyed, and with very pink cheeks. "Did you call, Polly?" he asked; "I heard you say something."

"Now you've gone and waked Davie up," exclaimed Polly, in a tone of great vexation.

"Goody!" screamed Joel, "now you will let him go fishing, won't you?" And he jumped to his feet and ran to the window to thrust his stubby head over the sill. "Dave, Dave, come out an' see the lot o' worms I've dug."

"No," said Polly, feeling dreadfully at the sight of David's face, as it fell at her words. "I'm sorry, Davie, but you were real tired, an' Mamsie wouldn't like you to go off any this afternoon."

"It's only to Cherry Brook," cried Joel, loudly.

"Now, Polly Pepper, I think you're real mean to keep him in, an' we'd catch a whole lot o' fish, an' maybe have some for supper."

It was always Joel's ambition to catch a fish big enough to cook, but as the brook, a little tumbling stream over a few ragged rocks, on the edge of Deacon Brown's meadow lot, only held minnows, with an occasional turtle and frog, this had never as yet happened.

Phronsie laid down the bit of calico she was puckering up by drawing through it a needle to which a coarse thread was tied, and looked gravely at Joel. "You must not say so of my Polly," she said gravely, shaking her head.

Joel's black hair ducked beneath the window. "I didn't mean —" he mumbled. "Polly, I didn't, truly." Then he flung himself on the grass and burst into tears, kicking over the pail. The angleworms wriggled along till they got to the edge, then quietly took themselves off.

David drew a long sigh and folded his hands. "I'm not a bit tired, and I should like to go, Polly," he said.

"No, Davie dear," said Polly, kindly, "you'd be tired before you'd gone halfway. And

Mamsie wouldn't like it. Do go back and lie down again on the bed."

"Oh, I can't," said little David, shrugging his shoulders, "it's all alone in there, Polly."

"Well, I can't leave my sewing, and you must have it dark, or else you won't go to sleep. Do try, Davie, that's a good boy."

But little Davie still shrugged his shoulders, and wouldn't even look at the bedroom door, but kept his back toward it.

"Dear me, Phronsie," cried Polly, in despair. "Now, if you'd go in and lie down by his side and hold his hand, maybe he'd go to sleep. He's half sick, and I don't want Mamsie to come home and find him so."

"I've got to sew, Polly," said Phronsie, with an important air, and holding up her mangy bit of calico, where all but one corner was in a pucker, "so I must stay right here and finish it. Truly, I must, Polly."

"O dear me!" exclaimed Polly, quickly, "then I don't know what is to be done. And Mamsie will come home, and then what will she say?" with another worried glance at David's flushed cheeks.

Phronsie drew a long breath and set another

crooked stitch. "I'll go, Polly," at last she said, with a long sigh, putting the puckered calico bit, with the needle hanging, carefully on the floor by her side. Then she got slowly out of her little wooden chair.

"Now, that's a good girl," cried Polly, reaching out her arms to catch her, and nearly smothering her with kisses. "Whatever should I do without you, Phronsie, pet? I'm sure I don't know."

"You couldn't do without me, could you, Polly?" cried Phronsie, very much pleased as Polly let her go and flew back to her sewing again.

"No in-*deed!*" cried Polly, warmly. "There, take Davie's hand, and both of you go into the bedroom like good children, and shut the door and go to sleep. That's nice!" and she smiled approvingly at them as they disappeared.

Joel cried on and on, his tears trailing off into the grass, till at last, as Polly took no notice of him, he raised his head to look in at the window at her. She didn't seem to see him, but sewed on and on quite composedly, as if Joel were not there. So he finally jumped up, and seeing his tin pail overturned on its side, he hurried to investigate.

"Oh, my worms have all run off!" he shouted. "Polly, the bad old things have every single one of 'em run away!" and he beat the bottom of the pail with the broken iron spoon in his vexation.

"Joel Pepper!" cried Polly, a little red spot coming in either cheek as she flung down her work on the floor by Phronsie's calico bit, "that's twice you've made a most awful noise; now you'll wake Davie up again, you bad, naughty boy," and without stopping to think, she dashed out doors, and before Joel could hardly breathe, she seized his shoulders and shook him smartly.

"Oh, what have I done! What have I done!" she exclaimed, and throwing herself down on the grass, she covered her face with her hands, waving back and forth in distress.

"You shook me!" cried Joel, his black eyes sparkling in anger. "Now I'll beat you, Polly Pepper," and he raised the old broken iron spoon. There they were — two little Peppers — oh, dreadful, to tell it — and Mamsie away!

"You may, Joe," said Polly, brokenly, and rocking back and forth, while the big tears

dripped down between her fingers, "for I've been bad to you, and Mamsie away." She could hardly speak for her sobs. "How could I! Oh, Joey, I'm so sorry. O dear — dear — dear!"

She went off now into such a gust of crying, that Joel forgot all about his anger. He threw away the spoon, and kneeling beside her, he put his arms about her neck. "Don't cry, Polly," he begged, "please don't."

"I can't help it, Joe," said Polly, struggling with her sobs. "O dear me! I can't ever forgive myself. I don't see how I came to do it. O dear me!"

At last Joel, in despair, jumped to his feet. "I'm going to get Grandma Bascom."

"Oh, no, you mustn't, Joe," cried Polly, bringing a very red face suddenly to view, the tears running in little rivers down her nose and cheeks. "There, see! I'm not going to cry any more. Come back, Joe," for he was starting off at a lively pace.

"Sure?" cried Joel, stopping a minute.

"Yes, I won't cry any more," cried poor Polly, swallowing very hard — "there, see, Joey dear," and she wiped off the last tear. "Now I'll help you dig some more worms," she

said, racking her brains to think of something by which to make up to Joel for the shaking.

"Will you?" cried Joel, in delight. "Oh, Polly, how nice! Here's the spoon — here's the spoon," and he ran and picked it out of the long grass.

"Yes, I will," promised Polly, stifling a sigh as she thought of the work to be made up in some way on the coat seams.

"And I'll sit here and see you," remarked Joel, doubling up in an easy position on the grass, "'cause you see there isn't but one spoon, Polly. Now dig a good lot," he said with a restful stretch.

So Polly dug and dug away, being careful to select long, fat worms. And presently there was a good number all wriggling away in the bottom of the pail. And at last Joel hopped up and peered in. "Oh, Polly, what a lot! An' they're juicy ones, and a great deal better'n mine. Now I guess I'll catch some fish, an' you shall fry 'em for supper." He seized the pail, and slung the pole over his shoulder again, and trudged off.

"All right," said Polly, with a loving little

pat, "and oh, Joey, I'm so sorry I was cross and shook you."

"I don't care," said Joel, pleasantly, "'cause you dug my worms for me, Polly," and he raced off.

But Polly went into the little brown house with a very sober face. And it wasn't till all the children, Ben and all, were abed that night, and she crept into Mamsie's arms and sobbed it all out on her breast, that she felt better and like being Polly again.

Joel rushed through the undergrowth and tangle of berry bushes, breaking through the wild grape vines that slapped him in the face and caught his pole; and, creeping and ducking under them, at last he struck the little path to the Cherry Brook, that gurgled its way along Farmer Brown's meadow. Underneath the cool trees it was dank and mossy, and he flung himself down to rest, first carefully setting his precious pail up against a big stone.

"I'm just goin' to catch the biggest fish you ever saw, Joel Pepper," he exclaimed to himself, for want of company. "Yes sir-*ree*," untwisting the string which, for want of a fishing line, he had tied to his pole. "Then I guess, when

Polly sees it, she'll be glad. Now I'll get the very juiciest worm in the pail." So he went to the pail, and was just leaning over to investigate its depths, when he heard voices.

Joel knew in a minute whose they were, and he tried to scrabble his things together and run and hide them in the thick bushes, when the boys to whom the voices belonged broke through the undergrowth on the other side of the brook.

"It's the Pepper boy," said one of them in an awful whisper. Then they stood still a minute, all three staring at each other. At last Joel picked up his pole and started to march away.

"Hold on," called one of the boys, the biggest and dirtiest, and he jumped across the brook. Joel went steadily along as well as he could for the vines and stubby trees, determined not to turn back for anybody's call, at any rate that dirty Jim Belden.

But Jim gave him no chance to think, and the first thing he knew, Joel was seized roughly by the shoulder. "Gimme them worms," and Jim tugged at the handle of the pail.

"I won't; they're my worms," screamed Joel, hanging on for dear life; "so there, now! you go right away. Polly dug 'em, Polly dug 'em," he

kept saying. But the scuffle was short, as the other boy raced up, and pulled too, so that pretty soon Joel was tumbled heels over head, into the brook, and the pail was in the hands of the biggest boy, who cried out joyfully, "Oh, see what a lot! now we'll go up to th' 'Pool.'" This was a deep spot a half mile or so away, where the stream widened. Mrs. Pepper never allowed the two boys to go there, unless Ben could go too, which was seldom indeed, and only looked upon as a very great treat.

Joel burst out in a great passion, as soon as he could scramble out of the brook, "Give me back my pail!" and he looked so very fierce, although he was so small, that without another word the other two ran away as fast as they could. Joel plunged after them, angrier every minute, and instead of turning off to the "Pool," Jim and the other boy ran straight across Deacon Brown's field.

"Oh, now he'll catch 'em," thought Joel, joyfully, without a thought of giving up the race. There was a man off in the further corner of the field. "Mr. Br-own," screamed Joel, shrilly. "Mr. Br-own!"

Jim and the other boy, seeing their mistake,

"'GIVE ME BACK MY PAIL!'"

turned off to the undergrowth. "Hold on there!" commanded Deacon Brown, in a dreadful voice. So there was nothing to do but stop.

But when he got to the spot where they stood rooted to the ground, there were no worms in the pail, they having been jiggled out in the chase. So Joel had to go back, and pick up his pole with the string hanging to it, and carry that home and his empty pail. "But that Jim Belden didn't have the worms, anyway," he said, with great satisfaction.

VIII

WHY THEY SAID NO

BEN came in and hung his cap up on its peg behind the door. Polly didn't see his face, for she was tying on Phronsie's eating apron, and Mother Pepper was in the pantry, else some one would have discovered that he was strangely excited.

"Come," said Polly, "we can't wait any longer for those boys. Can we, Mamsie?" she called

"No, we better sit down," said Mrs. Pepper, coming out with a plate in her hand. "I'm sorry they're late, for I've got a surprise for you all to-night." She set the plate on the table, and her black eyes sparkled. "Now, then, see that!"

"Ooh!" cried Polly, her brown eyes very wide, while Phronsie stopped climbing into her chair to precipitate herself into the midst of the group. "See, Ben! See!" exclaimed Polly, "it's white cake with real frosting on top. Oh, Mammy, where did you get it?"

Ben looked at the six big slices lying across the plate, but he didn't seem to see them. However, Polly didn't notice, for she was dancing around the table with Phronsie, to see which side the cake looked the best.

"White on top — real white on top!" sang Phronsie, beating her little hands together.

"I know it," cried Polly, almost as much excited. "Oh, how I wish those two boys were here! Mamsie, where *did* you get it? from dear Mrs. Henderson, I s'pose."

"No, guess again," said Mrs. Pepper, cheerily. Then she looked at Ben steadily out of her black eyes. "I was going past Miss Barber's, and she knocked on the window, and when I stopped she ran out, and gave it to me all done up. 'I've been watching for you,' she said, 'for I knew you were helping at Deacon Brown's to-day. We had comp'ny last night, and I want you to have some of sister's cake. She's had real good luck.' So that's all the story about the cake, Polly." Mother Pepper still looked at Ben, though she spoke as cheerily as ever.

"I'm so glad Miss Barber did have company last night," said Polly, her mouth watering for the taste of "sister's cake."

"I want a piece," said Phronsie, stopping her dance suddenly, to hold out both hands.

"Oh, no, Phronsie," said Polly, with a little laugh, "you must eat your bread first. Folks don't ever eat cake first."

"Don't they?" asked Phronsie.

"No, indeed; there, hop up into your chair." Polly flew into her own. "Why don't those boys come?" she cried in a vexed little way.

"It won't make them come any quicker to fret over it," observed Mother Pepper, composedly, and getting into her chair. "Come, Ben, sit down, and we'll begin."

So the grace was said, and the bread was passed. "Oh, Ben!" exclaimed Polly, in dismay, "you didn't wash your hands!" as he was going to take a piece.

"I forgot it," said Ben, looking down at them. Then he got out of his chair and went out into the woodshed, where a tin basin and a towel and soap were always ready, for Mother Pepper said they might be poor, and that they couldn't help, but they could keep clean and nice.

Polly nibbled at her dry bread, but she couldn't keep her eyes off the cake, and Phronsie bit little pieces all around the edge of her

slice. Then she laid it down. "Now I'm ready for the cake," she said, holding out both hands again. "Please give it to me, Mammy."

"Oh, no, Phronsie," said Mrs. Pepper, shaking her head, "Mother can't give it to you till you've eaten all your slice. Besides, you must wait till Polly is through, and I will pass it to her first."

"I don't want any more bread, Mammy dear," said Phronsie, gravely.

"You must eat it," said Mrs. Pepper, firmly.

"See, Phronsie, mine's going fast," cried Polly, with another bite that rapidly diminished her slice. "Oh, you can't think how soon it will be gone, if you begin to eat." And Polly munched away determinedly, but she kept looking at the cake. Ben came in, and slid into his chair, and took a piece of bread.

"Why don't those boys—" began Polly. "Oh, I forgot, Mamsie," with a little laugh, and the door opened, and in burst Joel and David with very red faces, and talking at once.

"Oh, it's comin'!"

"Over at Hillsbury—"

"Horses and—"

"Monkeys—"

"And a big elephant and — "

"A band — " this from Joel, who screamed it above Davie's faint treble.

"And a bear, and a hippi-hoppi — "

Polly dropped her bread-slice in astonishment, and Mrs. Pepper sat quite straight in her chair. Phronsie had just concluded to try again and do like Polly, so she sat quite still and stared, with her bread halfway to her mouth. Ben's head drooped over his plate, and he pushed his bread in rapidly, nearly choking himself.

"Boys," said Mrs. Pepper, "don't both talk together. Joel, you may begin, because you are the oldest." But it was impossible to stop them, as they rushed up to her and threw their arms around her.

"Oh, Mammy," cried little Davie, his cheeks aflame, "you can't think — there's monkeys ! "

At that Phronsie gave a little squeal, and before Polly could stop her, she slipped out of her chair and plunged over to her mother. "Oh, Mammy, I want a monkey, I do."

"And bears — and horses," shouted Joel, winding both arms around Mother Pepper's neck.

"Whatever in all this world ! " exclaimed

Mrs. Pepper, looking over their heads. Then her eyes fell on Ben. "Do you know anything of all this?" she asked.

"Yes'm," said Ben, his head dropping lower yet, while Joel and David howled on, and Phronsie screamed to be taken up in her mother's lap, and that she wanted a monkey too. Polly sat as if paralyzed.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Pepper.

"The circus," said Ben, slowly, "coming over to Hillsbury."

Polly sprang from her chair, upsetting it, and plunged over to Mrs. Pepper. "Oh, Mamsie!" she screamed, as loud as the others, "the circus! the circus! Oh, oh! Can't we go? We must!"

Poor Mrs. Pepper sank back in her chair, with the four little Peppers swarming all around her, and all pleading together, till the kitchen seemed fairly to ring with the noise.

"We can't, Polly," said Ben, hoarsely. "You know we can't. And Joel and David ought not to have told."

Polly turned a deaf ear, and kept on, "Oh, Mamsie, we've never seen one, 'cept the pictures. We must go!"

On hearing this from Polly, Joel and David made as much worse clamor as was possible, drowning Phronsie's voice.

"Aren't you ashamed, Polly!" cried Ben over at her. "You know we can't go, so what's the use?"

"We can go," cried Polly, passionately, back at him, "if Mamsie'll only say so. We've never seen one, and we *must* go."

"Now, children," said Mother Pepper, in a firm voice that rose above the din, "stop, every one of you, at once, and go and sit down."

When Mamsie spoke like that, the five little Peppers always knew that she meant to be obeyed, so they drew off from her and tumbled into their chairs; all but Phronsie. "I'll take you into my lap," said Mother Pepper, so Phronsie snuggled, well-contented, in her usual nest, and folded her small hands.

"Now, then," said Mrs. Pepper, "as it is quiet enough so I can think, I'll hear the story. Ben, you may begin."

"Oh, let me — let me, Mamsie," begged Joel. "You said I might, 'cause I'm the oldest."

"That was because it was between you and David to tell it, and you didn't take the chance,"

said Mother Pepper, coolly. "Now Ben must do it."

"Why, there's a big yellow paper down to the store," began Ben, slowly, and trying to make it as short as possible, "and —"

"It's got pictures of all the horses," interrupted Joel, springing up from his seat, his black eyes dancing, "and —"

"Joel, sit down," said Mrs. Pepper, sternly, "and don't interrupt. Go on, Ben."

Joel dropped, as if shot, back into his chair.

"And it's comin' to Hillsbury next week Wednesday," went on Ben, unwillingly, "and that's all, Mamsie. Only Joe and David shouldn't a-told."

"'Tisn't all," declared Polly, defiantly, with very red cheeks; "we must go! We've never seen a circus, and now it's goin' to be in Hillsbury, we *must* go!" She seemed unable to stop herself. Ben stared at her in amazement.

"Must is a hard word to use, Polly," said Mother Pepper, dryly.

"I mean you'll let us, I 'most know," mumbled Polly, her cheeks turning scarlet, and twisting her hands together. "Won't you, Mamsie?"

"Won't you, Mamsie?" piped Phronsie, pok-

ing her head up like a little bird out of her nest, to look into Mother Pepper's face.

"How much does it cost, Ben?" asked Mrs. Pepper, smiling down at her baby, but not answering.

"Fifteen cents for any one over twelve, and ten cents for boys and girls under twelve," said Ben.

"Um, that would be one fifteen cents for you, and ten cents for Polly and Joel, and —"

"Why, you must go, Mamsie," cried Polly; "we shouldn't any of us want to go without you, should we, Ben?"

"No, indeed," said Ben. "But we ain't any of us going, Polly," he finished.

At this there was another howl, breaking out from the two boys. Polly turned quite pale, but said nothing.

"Be quiet, Joel and David," said Mrs. Pepper, turning her black eyes on them. "No, children, if I could let you go at all, I should trust you with such a boy as Ben, and such a girl as Polly, to look after you." Polly raised her head, that had drooped at her mother's reproof, and Ben sat quite straight in his chair. "But I don't see as it's right for me to let you go."

There was a sign of another outbreak, but something in Mamsie's eyes stopped it halfway.

"In the first place, it's five miles to Hillsbury," said Mrs. Pepper, slowly, as if trying to put off the final decision as long as possible; "and you younger children couldn't walk it."

"I could, Mamsie," declared Joel, springing up again.

"Sit down, Joel; well, Davie couldn't. I shouldn't be willing for him to try, and walk clear back. And Phronsie — " Mrs. Pepper looked down at Phronsie's yellow head, and smiled. It wasn't necessary for her to say a word. "Mr. Tisbett'll be goin' over," said little Davie, hopefully, "an' he can take us."

"And that would cost money," said Mrs. Pepper.

"Somebody will let us sit in behind," said Joel, confidently; "there'll be lots of wagons goin'."

"And ever so many people going in them," added Mrs. Pepper. "No, my children shan't ever be a burden to other folks," and she lifted her head proudly. "Polly, run into the bedroom and get the stocking-leg."

The stocking-leg, in the upper drawer of the big bureau that belonged to Father Pepper's mother, always held the stray quarters and half dollars laid up for a nest-egg against a rainy day. Polly jumped out of her chair, glad to have something to do, and ran into the bedroom.

"I sh'd have screamed if I'd sat there another minute longer," she said, leaning up against the bureau. "O dear me! We *must* — I mean, what shall we do if we can't go? I guess Mamsie will let us go." And she pulled open the upper drawer, took out the stocking-leg, and ran back to put it in Mrs. Pepper's hand.

Mrs. Pepper slowly untied the red flannel string and shook out the contents on the table, the eyes of all five little Peppers riveted on them. There were six silver quarters, three halves, two ten-cent pieces, and eight pennies.

"Three dollars and twenty-eight cents," said Mrs. Pepper, slowly, as she set the pieces in a row. No one dared to speak, except Joel. "What a lot!" he cried joyfully; "now we can go, Mammy, can't we? Oh, whickets!" and he clapped David on the back.

"Children," said Mrs. Pepper, and her eyes swept the whole circle around the table, but they rested on Polly's face, "there won't anything pay very well, circus or anything else, if we go when we hadn't ought to. We haven't got a debt, thank the Lord, but that money — " she pointed to the row — "is all that keeps us from it."

It was impossible for Joel not to see by Polly's and Ben's faces, more than by what Mrs. Pepper had said, that they were not really to go, and he flung himself out of the chair and face downward on the floor, breaking into heart-rending sobs, little Davie at once joining him. Polly got out of her seat and hurried over to them on unsteady feet. "Boys," she said in a broken little voice, "don't cry so. You make Mamsie feel badly. Look at her face." But they didn't hear her.

"Boys," — she got down close to them and put her mouth to Joel's ear, — "you are making Mamsie sick," she said; "just look at her face." At the word "sick," Joel stopped screaming, and bobbed up his head to take a good look at Mrs. Pepper. "Mamsie, don't be sick," he screamed, now thoroughly frightened. And

jumping up, he ran to throw his arms around her, and hug her tightly.

"Mother won't be sick as long as she's got such good children as she has," cried Mother Pepper, putting her arms around Joel, to draw him close to her. But her lips were very white.

"Now, boys," said Ben, "I sh'd think you were two big babies, you act so. Joel's most a man, he's so big."

"I'm big, too, Ben," said David, getting up from the floor and wiping off the tears with the back of a grimy hand. "I'm most as tall as Joel is," and he stood very straight.

"Hoh! he isn't either," contradicted Joel, turning his round face, all tear-stained and streaky. "Now just look here, Ben," and he sprang out from Mother Pepper's arms and rushed up to David's side. "There, sir!"

"Well, you are both of you big enough to act better," said Ben, coolly. "Come on, now, to supper."

"You're standing on your tiptoes," cried little David, getting down on the floor by Joel to investigate. "Isn't he, Polly? Come and see."

"I'm not either," cried Joel, flatly; "hear my heels." And he slapped them down on the floor smartly.

"Children, don't quarrel," said Polly, finding her voice, "and come to supper. I don't b'lieve you know what we've got."

"What?" asked Joel, indifferently, feeling quite sure of the dry bread and possible molasses.

"Come and see," called Polly, trying to speak gayly.

"I see," piped David, craning his neck. Since he couldn't be as tall as Joel, it was well to turn his attention to other matters. "*Cake!*"

"Yes," said Phronsie, poking her head up again to shake it very gravely, "it's cake. And please may I have some, Mammy?" holding out her hand.

"So you shall," said her mother; "dear knows, I can't expect you to wait any longer for it. Polly, give her a good piece."

When Joel saw Polly handing out cake with white frosting on top, his black eyes stuck out, and he rushed without delay for his seat, teasing for a piece at once. But on Polly's assuring him that the bread must be eaten first, he began at once on the slice she cut for him. And being really very hungry, now that they had time to think about it, the two boys soon had

their portions eaten, nobody discovering, in the excitement, that the little hands were grimy, until Phronsie spoke. "See Joey's hands, Polly," and then everybody looked.

"My!" exclaimed Polly, quite herself, now. "I never saw such hands, Joel Pepper! Go right away and wash 'em as soon as ever you can."

"Smutty hands and cake!" exclaimed Mother Pepper.

Joel was so busy cramming the cake into his mouth that he didn't half hear. "I'm most through," he mumbled.

"Lay down your cake, and go and wash your face and hands at once, Joel," commanded Mrs. Pepper.

"Dave'll eat it," said Joel, his mouth half full.

"Oh, no, I won't," said little David, "and I'm going too, to wash mine." So he laid his cake-slice on his plate, and ran into the wood-shed.

"You had a bigger piece than mine," said Joel, getting the tin basin first, and filling it at the pump.

"No, I didn't," said David; "they were just alike."

"Well, it's bigger now," said Joel, bringing the basin to set it on the wood bench and thrust his face in. Then he splashed his hands, and gave them a hasty wipe on the long brown towel hanging from the rack. "Anyway, it's bigger now. There, I'm done, and you ought to give me a bite of yours."

Little David gave a sigh. "Well, you may have just one," he said slowly. Then he threw out the water from the basin, and carefully filled it again, while Joel dashed back gleefully into the kitchen.

"Joel, what are you doing, biting Davie's cake!" exclaimed Polly, a minute afterward, and looking across the table while she snipped off a little piece of the white frosting from her slice, wishing the whole world was made of cake with white on top, and wondering how long she could make hers last.

"Dave said I might," said Joel, with a very red face, and one cheek very much puffed out, while he turned David's slice over so that it didn't show where the big bite had been taken off. But his face grew quite red, and he didn't look in her brown eyes.

"For shame, Joe!" cried Ben at him, in a

way that made Mother Pepper look around. She hadn't heard Polly. Down went Joe under the table, and in a minute or two David hurried in.

Nobody said a word. David picked up his cake, and his face fell as he saw the big hole. But he said nothing, and fell to nibbling.

"I'd give some back, but mine's et up," said Joel, miserably, under the table.

"It's too bad, David," said Polly; "here now, you may have some of mine," and she broke off a generous bit.

"I told him he might have a bite," meekly said David, who never could bear to have Joel blamed. "I wanted him to have it," he added cheerfully.

"O dear-dear-dear," boohooed Joel.

Davie dropped his cake in a worried way.

"Don't, Joey," he said, leaning over to look at him.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," blubbered Joel. "O dear me!"

David, unable to bear it any longer, slipped out of his chair, and crept under the table to comfort Joel. But it wasn't till Polly said, "Come, Joey," that he would show his face.

Then he twisted his knuckles into his eyes, and hung his head.

Mother Pepper said never a word, only held out her arms, and Joel walked straight into them, bursting into the loud sob he had held back so long; and then she took his hand and led him into the bedroom, and the rest of the children sat still and very uncomfortable, and Davie wouldn't look at his cake. When they came out again, Joel marched straight to David, and said, "You may have my knife."

Joel's knife, with the tip of one blade broken, and the other all gone, was his dearest treasure.

It had been given to him by Deacon Brown, and its possession had made him very proud and boastful. It was the one thing Davie longed for, above all others.

"Oh, no, Joe, not your knife!" he cried, aghast, and shrinking back.

"Yes, you may have it," said Joel, decidedly, and running out into the entry to hurry into the woodshed to the wooden box where he kept his treasures.

"Yes, Davie, I would take it," said Mrs. Pepper. "Joel feels very sorry he's taken any of your cake, and he'd rather you had the knife."

"But it's Joel's knife," said Davie, "and he loves it."

"Not so much as he does to grow up a good boy," said Mother Pepper, proudly, as Joel came running in and laid the knife on the table in front of David. "It's yours, and I'm sorry I et your cake," he said in one burst.

Polly hopped out of her seat, and ran around the table to take Joel's black stubby head in her two hands. "Oh, Joel! I'm so glad!" she cried, in a happy little gust.

"Good for you, Joe!" cried Ben, approvingly.

"Pooh!" exclaimed Joel, twisting off, his face getting redder and redder. "Mamsie, stop 'em — do;" yet he liked it very much.

"Oh, Ben," cried Polly, after the last scrap of the wonderful cake had disappeared, the dishes were cleared away, and Phronsie put to bed, and everything was spick-span once more, "I've just thought of something perfectly splendid!"

"What is it?" cried Joel, who, despite all his efforts, was just beginning to think of the circus again. "Do tell, Polly! Now you're goin' to whisper with Ben, and you won't tell us."

"No, I shan't — and yes, I will," said Polly, all in the same breath. "It's this, Mamsie. Mayn't we have a little play out in the orchard next Wednesday, and can't Joel and David sit up a little longer to-night to talk it over? I've just thought of something splendid to act."

"Oh, may we, may we?" cried the two boys, in a tumult.

"Instead of the circus," Polly's brown eyes were saying. "Do, Mammy."

"Yes, you may," said Mrs. Pepper, indulgently, "sit up half an hour longer."

"We've had a cake to-night, and now Mamsie's going to let you two boys sit up. I think nobody ever had such a perfectly beautiful time," declared Polly, as they dragged their chairs around the table again, and Mamsie got out her big mending basket, "did you, Ben Pepper?"

"No, I never did, Polly," said Ben, happy in seeing her face bright and rosy once more, with the little smiles running all over it.

"Now begin," cried Joel, drumming impatiently on the table; "what's the play to be, Polly? I'm going to be a bear," he announced.

"Oh, Joel, you were a bear last time," said

Polly, with a little frown between her eyebrows.

"I don't care, I'm going to be a bear," repeated Joel, obstinately.

"See here, now, Polly makes this play, and you've got to be just what she says," said Ben.

"I'm so tired making plays with bears in 'em," said Polly, pushing off the little rings of brown hair with an impatient hand. Then she caught her mother's eye. "Never mind, Joey," she said with a gay little laugh, "I'll make the bear."

"Yes, you must be tired," declared Ben. "Joe, you oughtn't to tease Polly so. It's bad enough to have to make the plays, I think."

"Oh, I don't care," laughed Polly. "Well, now here's the play. You see, we want something quite fine and extra," and she looked at Ben meaningly. He nodded, so she rushed ahead, well pleased. "Well, the name is Mr. Primrose and his Cat."

"And the bear," shouted Joel. "And I know what I'm going to do, Polly, I'm going to eat the cat up."

"Oh, no, you mustn't, Joe," said Polly, "for

the cat is going to be Phronsie. Now you must be good and not scare her."

"I'll tell her I'm nothing but Joel, and I ain't a bear," said Joel.

"Hush about your old bear, Joe," said Ben. "Polly can't get on at all if you don't keep still."

"I'll fix it, Joey," said Polly, kindly, "so you can be a bear, only you must promise not to roar too much and scare Phronsie."

"I won't scare her a single bit, Polly," promised Joel, eagerly.

So then Joel and his bear being settled, Polly launched forth on the wonderful play, and Mother Pepper glanced up now and then from her mending, and a smile began to come on the face that had been soberly bent on her work.

"Poor things!" she said to herself. "And bless 'em, for the comforts they are!" But she sighed as she glanced around the bare old kitchen.

IX

THE BAG OF RYE FLOUR

ALL that week Mother Pepper kept Joel and David away from the store, and Polly or Ben had to go, whenever the errands made it necessary. Polly, when it was her turn, did not trust herself to look at the flaming yellow sheets of paper with the big staring letters across them, stuck up in the dirty store windows, or hung from the beams in among the kitchen utensils, or breadths of calico and gingham, wherever they would attract the most attention.

One, in particular, was nailed up just inside the door. It was pretty hard to avoid this, but Polly turned her head away, and tried not to think of it, but keep her mind on what Mamsie said just before starting. "Don't keep looking at what you want and can't have, but keep busy over what you can have;" so she set her brain hard to work over the play, trying to decide whether she would have Mr. Primrose, who was to be Ben, rescue from the bear the white cat, who was to be Phronsie, in the remains of the

old white fuzzy mat that Mrs. Henderson had given them to play with, or whether she (Polly), who was to be the fairy, should change her back into the small damsel she was at first, or whether — "

"Well, Polly, my girl," said Mr. Atkins, with a hearty laugh, "I've spoke to you three times, and you seem deef to-day."

He was a jolly good-tempered man, and very kind to Mrs. Pepper, sometimes giving her sacks and coats to make when he really didn't need them just then; and though he never waited for his money but once, and that was when the children had the measles, and Joel nearly died, he used to give large measures of things, and sometimes he'd slip in an apple or two, and once a whole fine orange went into the bag of Indian meal, so as to be a surprise when it was opened at home. So Polly liked Mr. Atkins very much.

Now she blushed rosy red. "Oh, I didn't mean — " she began, and was just going to say, "Please, I'd like three pounds rye flour, Mr. Atkins," when he broke out, "I s'pose you're a-thinkin' about the circus — don't wonder — I got my mind some on it myself."

"O dear, no," cried Polly, hastily, all in a tremble, and only anxious to get it out of her mind as soon as possible, and whirling around with her back to the wonderful picture.

"I s'pose, now, your Ma don't approve of 'em," he said, looking quite solemn all at once; "well there, I s'pose they ain't quite 'xactly the thing, but they look pretty nice on paper. See that fellow, now, Polly, a-flyin' through that ring. Beats all how they do it. Makes my head spin to look at him. See there!" and Mr. Atkins pointed a stubby forefinger, shaking with excitement, to the big poster hanging by the counter.

"Oh, I can't look, Mr. Atkins," she said hastily. "Please do hurry and give me the flour." And then she got so very miserable, for fear she had been rude, that she stood quite still, and the color flew out of her cheek.

"I s'pose your Ma don't approve," observed Mr. Atkins again, not being able to tear his gaze off from the splendid evolutions of the man flying through the ring, and others of a like nature; "well-well-well, I d'no's 'tis 'xactly the thing, but then — an' then them horses. Why, Polly, this man is a-ridin' five great strong prancing ones all to once, dancing like ginger."

Polly gave a great gasp. "Oh, if Joel could only see those horses once! It was too bad—it was cruel." Her heart seemed to jump into her throat, and to choke her. "We *must* go!" It seemed to her as if she screamed it, as she started suddenly and ran out of the store on wild little feet.

But Mr. Atkins, and the men and boys and women and girls left behind, were all staring open-mouthed at the pictures, and spelling out the no less wonderful descriptions of the staring yellow posters with the big flaring letters, so no one noticed her particularly, until the storekeeper tore his gaze away from the man flying through the paper rings, and the other one riding five prancing horses, and remarked, "I declare, I don't b'lieve I put up that rye flour for Polly Pepper, after all. Well, she'll come back for it, most likely, so I'll get it ready. Three pounds, she said." So he weighed it out, and tied it up, and set it to one side, saying to the frowsy-haired boy who helped him, "Jim, that's Mrs. Pepper's little girl's bundle, now remember."

"Yes," said Jim, with no eyes or ears for anything but the circus posters.

Polly ran across the road, and into Mr. Slimmen's meadow opposite, and to the further end, where she flung herself down on the stone wall, and pushed off the brown hair from her hot forehead. "O dear me, how could I!" she cried, twisting her hands tightly together. "What would Mamsie say! Now she never'll trust me to go to the store again. Oh, I shall cry! O dear, dear!"

"*Moo!*" said Mr. Slimmen's cow, coming close to the stone wall, to lay a friendly nose on Polly's gingham sleeve, and to stare with wide eyes of surprise at her being there at all.

"O dear me!" cried Polly, glad of anything to speak to, and laying her hot face against the soft one so near, and she threw her arms up over the cow's neck.

"*Moo!*" said Mr. Slimmen's cow, as if she quite understood the matter, and no one need explain. And Polly felt quite comforted, although the dreadful thought of going back into the store nearly overcame her. But remembering that Mamsie would be waiting for her, and worry if she did not soon come back, Polly made a desperate effort and hopped off the stone wall.

"*Moo!*" said Mr. Slimmen's cow, as if sorry

to have her go, as Polly ran off, determined to get it over with as soon as possible.

She had her bundle tucked under her arm, glad that no one had spoken to her; for Jim just pointed to it, when she laid the money down on the counter, and then turned back to study the poster again, and was skipping over the ground, when she met Joel coming at a lively pace down the road.

"Oh, Polly, what a lot of time you've been gone!" he exclaimed. "Mamsie sent me after you."

"Did she?" cried Polly, in dismay. "Well, we must hurry back then, as fast as we can."

"I'm goin' to the store," said Joel, edging down toward Mr. Atkins'.

"What for?" demanded Polly, stopping a moment. "Did Mamsie send you for anything?"

"N-no — not exactly," said Joel, digging his bare toes into the sand; "but I might — might — p'r'aps get a letter, Polly," he added, as a bright idea struck him. Mr. Atkins, besides being the storekeeper, was also postmaster.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Polly; "why, Mamsie never has any letters, Joel. There isn't anybody to write to her."

"She may, p'r'aps," said Joel, confidently "there may be one this afternoon. I'm goin' to see," and he darted off before Polly had time to stop him.

"*Joel!*" she called, running after him. But as well try to stop the north wind. Joel raced up over the steps and disappeared within the store. Polly, endeavoring to reach him before he saw the yellow and red posters again, put forth all her effort, but stubbed her toe against a big stone, and fell flat. Away flew her bundle of flour — thud went the paper bag, and off came the string, and there it was all spilled on the ground.

Joel didn't ask about the letter for Mamsie, but the minute his black eyes fell on those horses careering and prancing and dancing, he was nearly beside himself. And pushing in between the men and boys of the largest group, he stared, spellbound, and lost to everything else.

"Now that's too bad!" said a voice that Polly loved dearly to hear, and some one lifted her up out of the sandy road. The dust was all in her eyes, so she couldn't see for a minute, but she knew 'twas Parson Henderson. "Well, Polly,

I don't believe you are much hurt," he said kindly. "A tumble in the dirt isn't the worst thing in the world, is it?"

Polly looked around for her bundle, anxiously. All the while she was saying, "Oh, thank you, sir. I'm not hurt a bit." But all the money for the rye flour gone! She could get no more, for Mamsie never had things charged, although Mr. Atkins was quite willing to do so. "'Tisn't safe," Mrs. Pepper always said; "if I do it once, I may again, so I'll pay as I go."

Parson Henderson looked off the road over his spectacles and saw the rye flour all sprinkled on every side, just where it had flown. "Now that's too bad!" he said. "Well, Polly, they say it's no use to cry over spilt milk, and I suppose spilt flour is just as bad," and he took her hand. "Let us see if Mr. Atkins hasn't some more." But Polly hung back; still, she must go into the store and get Joel. So she started forward again, and said impulsively, "I won't get any more flour, please, Mr. Henderson, but Joel's there, and he must come home with me."

"I'm intending to get some flour to send to Mrs. Pepper," said Parson Henderson, "and you don't have anything to do about it, but to carry

the bundle, Polly," he added lightly. So they were presently in the centre of the store. When Mr. Atkins saw the minister, he got away from the red and yellow poster as soon as he could, and came forward, rubbing his hands. So Mr. Henderson, not saying a word about Polly's accident, bought some rye flour, and several other things for the parsonage, chatting pleasantly all the time. But the storekeeper didn't say a word about the circus.

Polly was up by Joel, where he stood, his round face plastered up to the flaming sheet. "Come home, Joey," she whispered, trying to draw him off.

"Gee-wheezes!" exclaimed Joel, his cheeks red as fire, and his black eyes sticking out. "See, Polly, I can ride as good as that man," pointing to the one who had so roused Mr. Atkins' admiration, "if I had five horses. Yes, sir-*ree!*"

The farmers standing about burst out laughing, and punched each other to see him. "Joel," said Polly, in a low voice, and putting her arm around him, "come home at once, that's a good boy!"

"Look at that white horse, Polly!" cried Joel,

"'GEE-WHEEZES! I CAN RIDE AS GOOD AS THAT MAN'"

quite gone with excitement. "See him dance, like this, Polly," and he slapped his sturdy leg, and kicked out suddenly. Everybody laughed, the farmers guffawing in delight; and one small girl on the edge of the group who burst out, "Tehe-ee!" couldn't stop. Joel suddenly turned and saw them all; and he doubled up his little brown fists, and squared his shoulders. "Stop laughing at me!" he cried, throwing back his head defiantly, his black eyes sparkling in anger.

"Joel!" commanded Polly, in great distress. Then a hand reached over between them and touched him on the shoulder. "Come here, my boy," said Parson Henderson, and before Joel knew it, there he was marching off out of the store.

Parson Henderson said not a word, only, "Run back, Polly, and get the bundle of rye flour for me. Tell Mr. Atkins I'll step in for the other things." And Polly, doing as she was bidden, and catching up with them as they walked slowly down the dusty road, heard the minister say, "Well now, Joel, I should like to go fishing with you some day."

Joel, who had hung his head sheepishly, now

raised it. "Oh, would you?" he cried; "that would be prime!"

"Yes," said Parson Henderson, "I think it would be, Joel," and he laughed gayly.

"O dear, isn't he good!" cried Polly, softly, to herself, as she gained Joel's other side. Then she suddenly ran around him, and stepped up to the minister.

"I think you might walk next to me," said Joel, in a dudgeon, craning his neck to look past Parson Henderson.

"So I will, Joel," answered Polly, "in a minute." Then she looked up into the minister's face. "Oh, thank you so very much, sir!" she said, the color rushing all over her round cheeks.

"All right, Polly," said the minister, smiling down at her. "I've enjoyed my walk very much, and Joel and I are going fishing together, some day. Now I must say good-by," and he stopped.

"Here is your bundle," said Polly, handing up the rye flour.

"That's Mrs. Pepper's bundle," answered Parson Henderson, cheerily, and he was gone.

"What's in the bundle?" cried Joel, crowd-

ing up to Polly. "Let me see; let me see, Polly."

"Take care, Joe," said Polly, whirling around and covering the bundle with her arms as best she could, "or you'll spill it again."

"Spill it again?" repeated Joel, wonderingly. "I haven't spilled any bundle, Polly Pepper. Let me see what's in it?" and he tried to get hold of one end that stuck out.

"Joel Pepper!" exclaimed Polly, quite worn out, "you've been a bad, wicked boy, and now you're going to tear this bundle all to pieces. Stop it!" she commanded sharply.

"I haven't been a bad, wicked boy," contradicted Joel, in a loud, vehement tone, and stamping with his bare heel in the dust that flew up in their faces in a little cloud, "so there now, Polly Pepper!"

And there they were, those two little Peppers, in the middle of the road, in such a state, and Mamsie smiling over her work as she thought of her children!

X

MAMSIE'S SURPRISE

POLLY cried herself to sleep that night, although Mother Pepper had comforted and cuddled her when the whole story had come out on their return; how in a minute the passion had died down when the two children thought of Mamsie as they stood there in the road. "Joel was the first to be sorry," Polly had said generously, when confessing it all.

"No, I wasn't," contradicted Joel, "Polly looked sorry first."

"Polly was older," Mother Pepper had said gravely.

"I know it," said Polly, and her head drooped lower yet.

"But Joey was very naughty indeed in Mr. Atkins' store · and besides, he ought not to have gone there." And Mrs. Pepper's face looked very sad indeed.

The two children, not having a word to say to this, stood very mournfully in front of her.

The bedroom door was shut fast, and Ben was doing his best out in the kitchen to keep the other two children amused, in this unwonted state of affairs.

"I wish you'd punish me, Mammy," said Polly, in a broken little voice, "real hard."

"And me, too," cried Joel, sniffling.

"I've never punished you children since you were big enough to know better," said Mother Pepper, slowly, "and I don't believe I can begin now. And it seems to me it's the best way for you to punish yourselves. So I'll leave you to think over it," and she went out and closed the door on them.

How long they sat there, Polly didn't know, and as for Joel, he was in such a state of mind, he couldn't tell anything, only that Polly and he finally crept out in the gathering dusk of the long afternoon. No one but Mother Pepper ever knew the reason for the many unwelcome little tasks that Joey did after that, and, strange to relate, without a single grumble, while as Polly couldn't very well do more work than she did at present, and as there were no luxuries to give up in the way of eatables, the Peppers having butter and other nice things only when

people were good enough to send them some, it is hard to think what she could do to punish herself. But that was Mother Pepper's and Joel's and her secret. And then Mamsie cuddled them and comforted them. Only Polly, when she went to bed that night, felt the tears drop quite fast on her pillow, and that was the last thing she remembered before she dropped to sleep.

Meantime, it was rather hard work rehearsing the little play. "We'd give that up, Mamsie," cried Polly, though Joel made a wry face as he agreed to it, "but the others want it so much."

"But that wouldn't be a very good way: to make other people suffer for your faults," Mrs. Pepper had replied. So the work over the little play went on, as if nothing sad had happened. But Polly carried a sorry little face about, until Phronsie would look at her wonderingly, or Davie would forget to smile; on such occasions Mrs. Pepper would look at her and raise her finger warningly, and Polly would exclaim, "Oh, I forgot," and then she would toss them a merry little bit of nonsense that made them happy at once. But down in her heart Polly had many sad thoughts.

At last it was the great day. Nobody said "circus," but all the five little Peppers shouted it was the Play Day! And it really didn't rain, and the sky was as blue as could be, and Mamsie stayed home that day, and oh! Polly was quite sure she smelt something very nice, when she raced into the kitchen in the middle of the morning. Mother Pepper had sent them all out to rehearse the play in the orchard, and in the midst of it Polly cried out that she had forgotten the wings she was to put on as fairy godmother, when she appeared in time to rescue the little white cat, and to change her into a small girl again. She had made them, with the greatest trouble, out of thin paper and some old wire, and for fear they would get broken in the woodshed, Mamsie had said she might put them in the lower drawer of the big bureau in the bedroom, where Phronsie's red-topped shoes were always kept wrapped up. So now Polly dashed suddenly into the kitchen to run after them.

"Oh, Mamsie!" she exclaimed suddenly, wrinkling up her nose at the unwonted smell of something baking.

Mother Pepper was stooping over the oven

door, which was open. She closed it quickly, and stood straight. "Polly," she said, and there was a little laugh in her eyes, although her firm lips were closed, "you are not to say anything what you think to the other children."

"No, Mamsie, I won't," promised Polly, with a wild thought at her heart, "Could Mamsie possibly be making a cake?" as she rushed into the bedroom, got the wings, and raced out again. And all through the rehearsing she kept thinking how good it smelt when that little whiff from the oven flew out.

And Mother Pepper smiled away to herself, and the voices from the orchard, with its one scraggy apple tree, came pealing in through the open window, as the rehearsal for the grand play was in progress. And then the whole bunch of little Peppers hurried off to get some wild flowers, "for it won't be much," Polly had said, "without some posies to put on the table" (the big stone Ben had tugged home from Deacon Brown's meadow).

"I'm glad Polly'll have her posies," said Mrs. Pepper, hearing that, and seeing them go on the flower-hunt, as she paused a moment at the window. "Now they'll be good to trim the ca—"

And it almost popped out, and she didn't mean to whisper the secret, even to herself!

When the children came back from roaming the fields and woods, with the blossoms and green vines gathered in their aprons and arms, and they were all nicely set in the cracked tea-cup with the handle gone that Mamsie had given them some time before, and some other dishes that Mrs. Pepper had handed out with strict charges to be careful of 'em, they all stood off in a row from the stone table, in delighted admiration.

"Isn't it perfectly beautiful!" exclaimed Polly, in a rapture, and clasping her hands.

"Perfectly beautiful!" breathed little David.

"Be-*yew*-ful!" echoed Phronsie, hopping up and down with very pink cheeks, and her hair flying.

"It looks very well, Polly," said Ben, in a practical way.

"I wish we had somethin' to eat," began Joel.

"Oh, Joey!" cried Polly, reproachfully. But her heart jumped at the recollection of the lovely smell that came from the oven, and Mamsie's face. "Now, children," she said, "we've got everything all done," with a quick glance

around, "and Phronsie must have her nap, so's to be a nice little wide-awake white cat. Oh, Ben, leave the fur rug and the other things out under the table," as Ben began piling them up to carry back to the woodshed.

"Mamsie said, Always put everything back when we'd got through playing," said Ben.

"Well, she'll let us put them there, we're going to use them so soon, I know," said Polly, "if you tuck 'em in neatly. Won't you, Mamsie?" she cried, running to the window to thrust her brown head in.

"Yes," said Mrs. Pepper.

"And may we all come in now?" asked Polly.

"Yes," said Mother Pepper again.

"Don't forget your wings, Polly," cried Joel, picking them up where Polly had carefully laid them against the tree, and rushing to her, waving them aloft.

"Take care, Joe!" warned Ben, but too late. One wing flopped over, and caught in a knobby old branch of the apple tree, and in a minute there was a big hole right in the middle!

"Oh, you—" began Polly, passionately, when she turned and saw what was done. In a min-

ute she dashed over to Joel and threw her arms around him. "You couldn't help it," she finished, "and I can paste a piece of paper over it, and it will be most as good as new," while the children stood aghast at the mischief, and Ben exclaimed, "How could you, Joe! Why didn't you let it alone?"

"I didn't mean to. And now it won't fly — fly," screamed Joel, in a gust.

"Oh, yes, it will," declared Polly, merrily; "you'll see. And when I get it on, Joey Pepper, look out and look if you don't see me sailing up to the sky."

Joel came out of his sobs and looked up to the blue sky, and smiled through his tears, and when David and Phronsie saw Polly so merry, they smiled too, and Ben caught Polly's eye and didn't say any more. So they all marched into the house, and Phronsie was tucked up on Mamsie's bed, for her nap, and Polly sat down to mend her broken wing.

Mrs. Pepper, going on with her work, sent her a smile and loving look, that said just as plainly as words could speak it, "You're trying hard, Polly, my girl, and Mother knows it." So Polly began to hum at her task, and pres-

ently the kitchen became the very cheeriest place possible. What they would have done if any of them had happened to spy out what was on the upper shelf of the cupboard, covered carefully with a clean old towel, cannot possibly be told.

At last it came to be three o'clock, the hour of the grand play. Mrs. Pepper, as audience, was seated in her big rocking chair that Ben had brought out from the kitchen and placed in the best spot on the grass to see it all, and Polly and Ben and Joel and David and Phronsie were in the depths of excitement, and flitting here and there, Polly, as chief director, having a perfectly awful time to get them into their parts, particularly as Phronsie would keep rushing up, the old white fur rug nearly tripping her up every step, to lay her soft face against Mother Pepper's, and cry out, "I'm to be a white cat, Mamsie. I truly am!" And Joel would insist on roaring like a bear, and prancing and waving his arms, around which Polly had tied a lot of black hair that Mamsie had let her take out of her cushion.

"Joel, you spoil everything!" cried Ben at him. "See here, now all your hair is tumbling off from your arms."

"'I'M TO BE A WHITE CAT, MAMSIE'"

"They ain't arms. They're paws," said Joel, stopping suddenly to look with dismay at the damage he was making. "Polly didn't tie it on good," he said, trying to stuff back the loose hair.

"Yes, she did, too, real good," retorted Ben, "only you are flourishing round so, nothing would keep on you. Keep still, can't you!"

"And I'll tie it on again," said Polly, "if you'll wait till I fix Davie — just a minute — there, Davie, you're all right. Now, says I, Mr. Bear," and she flew over to Joel again.

Once more Mother Pepper sent her a swift approving smile, and Polly's heart was so warm that a little sunbeam seemed suddenly to have hopped right down there. And the little play went on from first to last perfectly splendidly, and Mrs. Pepper, feeling very strange indeed to be sitting there in the middle of the afternoon with nothing in her hands to work over, clapped them together and applauded enough for a big audience. And there never was such a good time in all this world — no, not even under the big white circus tent over in Hillsbury!

"I'm glad you like it!" cried Polly, tumbling over in a heap on the grass when it was all

over, and the audience got out of the big rocking chair.

"It was very nice indeed, Polly," said Mother Pepper, with shining eyes.

"Indeed it was!" declared Ben with enthusiasm, which meant a great deal from him.

"And now, children," said Mrs. Pepper, "you rest on the grass and talk it over, and I will call you into the house by and by."

"I don't ever want to go in," declared Joel, positively, and rolling over on the grass to wave his legs in the air, while little Davie lay quite still. "It was good to be in the play, Polly," he said, "but it's nice to rest here."

"I was a white cat, Polly," said Phronsie, sitting down on the grass as close to Polly as she could get, and tucking up her feet under her.

"So you were, Pet," cried Polly, "the loveliest, sweetest white cat in all the world, Phronsie dear," giving her a little hug. "O dear me, I'm glad it's done, and that it was nice."

"It was the nicest thing you've ever done, Polly," declared Ben, with emphasis.

"Chil-*dren!*" Mamsie's voice, and it had a new sound.

But Joel gave his sturdy legs another wave. "I wish we could stay out here longer," he said. So it happened that he was last in the procession filing into the little brown house, instead of first, as was usually the case.

"*Oh, Mamsie!*" cried Polly, and, "*Oh, Mamsie!*" exclaimed every one of the others, while Joel pushed in between them as fast as he could, anxious to see what it all was.

There was the table drawn out in the middle of the kitchen and spread with a clean white cloth. And on it stood a cake, yes, a big one, and there was — yes, there actually was white on top! When Polly saw that, she sat right down in the first chair. As for Ben, he was just as much astonished, and couldn't stop the children from reaching out to pick at the cake.

"I took some of your flowers, Polly, to trim it with," said Mother Pepper, pointing to the wreath running around the big cake. "Now, children, all of you sit down, and Polly shall cut it, for she made the play." She handed Polly the big knife, sharpened up till it shone as bright as could be.

"Let me — let me!" screamed Joel, with no

eyes now for anything but the sharp knife "I've never cut a cake. Mammy, let me!"

"Neither has Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, quietly. "No, Joe, Polly made the play, else you couldn't any of you have had this nice time."

"And she's worked herself most to death to get us through it," said Ben.

Polly had seized the big knife, and taken one step toward the wonderful cake. Now she stopped, and looked over at Joel. "You may," she said, smiling brightly.

"Oh, goody!" cried Joel, plunging forward. Then he stopped suddenly, on meeting his mother's eye. "I'd rather not," he said.

"Go on, Polly, Joel's right," said Mrs. Pepper, in satisfaction. So the slices were cut very slowly, Polly breathing hard with anxiety. But the white frosting didn't fall off a bit, and each piece was soon laid on a plate by Mother Pepper, and passed, first to Ben and then to the others, and to Phronsie last of all, of course, because she was the youngest.

When it was all over, this delightful surprise of Mamsie's, and Polly and Mrs. Pepper were clearing up, Joel nudged David. "Come on, Dave," he whispered, and the two boys ran out to the orchard again.

"I'm goin' to be bear again," cried Joel. "O dear me! Ben's taken in all the black hair," he cried, in great disappointment.

"He had to put it back in Mamsie's cushion again," said David. "You know he promised."

"He might have left it a little bit of a while," grumbled Joel.

"He said he'd do it right away," persisted David, "so he had to, Joel."

"Well, anyway, I'll be bear again without the black hair, then," declared Joel. "Now, look out, Dave, 'cause I'm goin' to climb up th' apple tree."

"Bears don't climb up trees," observed little David, critically, watching Joel's progress, quite content to sit down on the grass meanwhile.

"Well, I'm goin' to, when I'm a bear," cried Joel, now well up in the midst of the gnarled branches. "I'm goin' to climb trees, and do everything I want to, so there, Dave Pepper!"

Little David said nothing, and turned his gaze downward, and a big green worm, that had somehow lost his way in the tall grass, meandered past him, trying to get home. So he put forth a gentle finger, bending down the biggest spears accommodatingly, and was so absorbed in

the matter that he forgot Joel, until he heard a voice, "Hi, there; look, Dave, look!"

"O dear me, Joe!" exclaimed David, letting the green spears swing back abruptly, and viewing Joel in alarm, "you'll fall. Do come down."

"Pooh! I can bend way out. See, Dave! See!" cried Joel, twisting his legs around the branch on which he sat, almost at the very tip of the apple tree, and he swung both arms exultingly. There was a crack, a swish, and something came tumbling through the air, and before David could utter a sound, there lay Joel on the grass at his feet.

XI

DR. FISHER'S VISIT

BEN picked him up, as Mother Pepper and the others hurried out, on hearing David scream. Joel lay so still and white in Ben's arms that Polly turned quite faint. But when she saw Mamsie's face, she bent over to Phronsie. "Come here, Pet," she tried to say, as she drew her off that she might not see.

"What is it, Polly?" asked Phronsie, wonderingly. "What is Ben carrying Joey for?"

"Now I must wash off the cake-crumbs, they're all over your face, Phronsie," said Polly, desperately.

"Carry him into the bedroom," Mother Pepper was saying.

"Come, child," Polly pulled Phronsie hastily toward the woodshed, "you must really let me wash your face."

"Why do you want to wash it in the woodshed, Polly?" asked Phronsie, obstinately, holding back. "I want to wash it in Mamsie's nice bowl."

"Oh, Phronsie, please come," begged Polly, still holding her arm. "See, if you don't, I shall cry." Which was the truth as the tears were beginning to come in Polly's brown eyes. Seeing this, Phronsie yielded, and pattered along by Polly's side obediently, and allowed her little face to be scrubbed and wiped quite dry, Polly's heart all the while going like a trip-hammer, and her ears pricked up for any word that might tell her of Joel. At last she could bear it no longer.

"Phronsie," she said, when the round cheeks and hands were as clean as clean could be, "now look at me, dear."

Phronsie lifted her blue eyes and fixed them in wide-eyed astonishment on Polly's face.

"What makes you do so, Polly?" she asked wonderingly.

"Never mind," said Polly, with an awful feeling at her heart, it was so still out in the kitchen and bedroom. "Now, you must do just as I tell you, and not ask me any questions. Polly wants you to do it, to go and sit down on that bench," pointing to a little low one in the corner, "and not stir till I call you."

Phronsie looked over at the little bench.

"I'll go, Polly," she said with a sigh, "if you want me to."

Polly dropped a hasty kiss on the yellow hair, then fled on unsteady feet through the kitchen and into the bedroom. Mother Pepper was bending over Joel. Ben was holding the bowl of water, and Davie was crying and wringing his hands at the foot of the bed, with his eyes on Joel's face.

"You better go for Dr. Fisher, Ben," Mrs. Pepper said hoarsely, putting the wet cloth into the bowl.

Polly crept up to her side. "Hasn't Grandma Bascom anything?" she asked. "Shall I go and see?"

"No," said Mrs. Pepper. "And the doctor must see if he's broken any limbs, or is hurt inside." Ben was already out and running down the road at top speed.

It seemed an hour. It was really but ten minutes, when a step bounded out in the kitchen. Mrs. Pepper looked at Polly, who stole silently out, and with a gasp almost tumbled into the arms of a little man with very big spectacles. "Oh, Dr. Fisher!" she cried, "I'm *so* glad!"

"And I'm glad, too," said little Dr. Fisher, beaming at her. "Why, what's the matter, Polly, my girl?" as Polly seemed to be almost tumbling over. "You see, I've come to take Phronsie to ride. I haven't been able to a good while back," he mourned, "but perhaps you'd better go," setting his spectacles to take a keen look at her.

"Oh, Dr. Fisher! Ben's gone for you," gasped Polly, seizing his hand, to draw him to the bedroom door.

"Gone for me!" repeated Dr. Fisher, taking the words out of her mouth. "Who's sick?" and his face paled abruptly.

"Joel," gasped Polly; "he fell from the apple tree. Oh, do come, dear Dr. Fisher."

The little doctor was by this time in the bedroom. "Don't worry, ma'am," he said to Mrs. Pepper, then he hurried to the side of the bed and bent over Joel.

"I ain't sick," exclaimed Joel, opening his eyes to look up into the big spectacles. "I wish people'd let me alone," and he gave an irritable flounce. "Oh — it's Dr. Fisher," he finished joyfully.

"So it is," assented the little doctor, bobbing

his head amiably, so that the big spectacles slipped down to the end of his nose. Then he looked to the others to keep still.

"You'll take me to ride with you in the gig, won't you, Dr. Fisher?" begged Joel. His face was still white, but his eyes were as bright as ever.

"Maybe," said the little doctor. "Well, now let's see. You've been playing up in the apple tree, haven't you?" Meanwhile, his long thin fingers were going rapidly all over Joel's bones and muscles.

"Yes," said Joel, nodding. "And I was a bear, Dr. Fisher."

"I used to play bear when I was no bigger than you are, Joel," said Dr. Fisher, whose fingers seemed to be everywhere at once.

"I don't b'lieve you were as big a bear as I was," said Joel, sturdily. "No, sir-*ree!* And I went clear out to the tip of th' apple tree. Now could you do that, Dr. Fisher?" he asked triumphantly.

"I wouldn't try it again, if I were you," said the little doctor, ignoring the question, while his fingers went rapidly on their work.

"And may I go to ride in your gig?" begged

Joel, twisting away to the other side of the bed, "and what are you feeling my legs all over for?"

Little Dr. Fisher stood up quite straight and looked across at Mrs. Pepper. "He's sound as a nut," he said.

"Praise the Lord!" exclaimed Mother Pepper. Polly ran up to her and threw her arms around her. "Mamsie, just think, Joel's all well!" she cried convulsively.

Little Davie threw himself flat on the floor and cried as hard as he could. Polly ran over to him, "Why, Davie," she cried, getting down on the floor by his side, "don't you understand? Joel's all well. Dr. Fisher says so."

"I know it," sobbed Davie, "but I can't stop. I'm so happy, Polly."

"Well, you must stop," commanded Polly, firmly, "'cause you'll make Joel feel badly if he hears you, Davie."

So Davie hushed his tears. Since Joel might hear him, there must be no crying. But he sat on the floor, and wouldn't get up.

And then the door opened suddenly, and Ben hurried in with a white, disappointed face. "He isn't home, and they don't know when —

Why!" for there sat little Dr. Fisher laughing and peering at him over his big spectacles.

"Yes, Joel may go to ride," said Dr. Fisher, when Ben had gotten over his surprise a bit; "that is, if Polly will give up her seat,—for I'd invited her," and he looked over at her.

"Yes, I will, indeed," said Polly, with a happy little laugh. "Oh, Joe, you'll have such a good time!" kissing his cheek, into which the color was slowly coming back.

"I know it," said Joel, wheeling over to give a roll out of bed.

"Take it easy," said Dr. Fisher, "there's plenty of time. Feel all right, my boy?"

"No, I don't," said Joel, standing on the floor.

Mrs. Pepper's cheek paled, and an anxious look came into her black eyes at once.

"Whereabouts do you feel badly?" asked the doctor, in surprise.

"Here," said Joel, laying his hand on his jacket-front. "I'm so hungry."

"Do give him something to eat, Mrs. Pepper," said Dr. Fisher, laughing heartily, "then we'll be off. And Polly, you and I will have a ride next time," he said, darting off

before Mrs. Pepper had a chance to pay him, or even to thank him.

"But that I never could do enough," she said, wiping her eyes on her apron, "but the Lord will, I know."

Joel was already in the gig, peeping out at them, and teasing Dr. Fisher to hurry. They had driven off, and been gone some time, when suddenly Polly started in dismay as she was setting the table for supper.

"You most dropped that dish, Polly," said little Davie, looking at her in amazement.

"I forgot — Phronsie — O dear!" gasped Polly, setting the dish in her hand suddenly on the table, and plunging out of the room.

There sat Phronsie in the woodshed on the little bench, her rusty little shoes placed patiently before her, and her hands folded in her lap. "I'm so tired, Polly," she said plaintively.

"So you must be!" cried Polly, in a spasm of remorse, and lifting her up. "Well, now we'll have such a nice time, Phronsie, you can't think," covering her with kisses.

"You never came, Polly," said Phronsie, mournfully shaking her yellow head, "never at all."

"Don't, Phronsie," cried Polly, almost smothering her as she hugged her tightly.

"Oh, Polly, you hurt me!" cried Phronsie.

"Did I, Pet? well, I won't do so any more. Now, says I, one, two — three, here we go into the kitchen!" and Polly set her down on the floor.

"It is nice to walk with my feet," said Phronsie, giving a long stretch to her fat little legs. "Little things kept sticking into 'em, Polly, most all the time."

"The prickles, from sitting still," said Polly. "Oh, Phronsie dear, I never shall forgive myself for forgetting you," as Phronsie pattered across the kitchen, to clamber into Mother Pepper's lap.

But notwithstanding all the wonderful things that happened that day, Joel didn't quite forget the circus, and he whispered to David that night, after they had hopped into bed, and pulled the sheet over their heads, "I'm goin' to have a circus of my own, so there!"

Little David was all worn out with the exciting events of the day, and he didn't hear him, as he fell asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. So Joel, not finding it very

much fun to talk when there was no one to listen, closed his eyes, and before he knew it, he was asleep too. Ben, looking across at the two little faces, as he came up into the loft to go to bed, said to himself, "Well, I'm thankful that Joe's asleep." And he gave a sigh of relief.

The next days were full of work. "Play can't come all the time," Mrs. Pepper observed wisely. She sent Polly down with the money for the doctor's visit, pinned up carefully in a paper, which the little doctor promptly returned the next day, Polly having left it, as he was away on his rounds. So Mrs. Pepper could do nothing but tie it into the old stocking-leg again, in the bureau drawer. "Children," she said, drawing them all up around her, "we must never forget to do something for Dr. Fisher, and may the Lord give us a chance soon. He's been so good to us."

"There never'll come a chance, Mamsie," said Polly, disconsolately, "we're so poor."

"Chances come, if people look for 'em," observed Mrs. Pepper, shortly, as she shut the drawer.

"We ain't poor," cried Joel, who never could bear to be called so.

"Yes, we are," said Polly, positively, "we are poor, Joel. That's the truth, Joel, and you oughtn't to mind hearing it."

"Well, we ain't goin' to be poor," declared Joel, confidently.

"When Joel's ships come in, I s'pose he means," said Ben, and the children shouted.

"I don't care," said Joel, when the laugh died down, "we ain't goin' to be poor when I git to be a man. I'm goin' to be awful rich."

"Well, you'll have to work when you're a boy, then," said Mrs. Pepper, sensibly. "Riches don't tumble into lazy folks' laps."

"Then I'm goin' to work right straight off," cried Joel, springing away on nimble feet. "Come on, Dave, and help pick those old rocks."

But a terrible shower came on, and drove them all within doors, and it grew so dark that Polly couldn't see to sew. So the three youngest children gathered around her and clamored for a story.

"Yes," said Polly, "I will. Let's get down on the floor in a ring." So they all sat down in the middle of the kitchen floor, after some

delay, caused by Joel's vociferous demands to sit next to Polly.

"Phronsie must be one side," said Polly, "of course."

"Yes, I must, Joey," said Phronsie, cuddling up closer yet to Polly.

"Well, the other side, then," said Joel, struggling to slip in between Polly and little David, and twitching Davie's arm.

"Stop, Joe, and sit down over here," cried Ben, seizing him by the jacket, "else you shan't sit anywhere."

"Ow!" howled Joel, pulling smartly at David.

"Davie got here first," said Polly, "and he's younger. How can you, Joe?" she added reproachfully.

"He's always younger," said Joel, gloomily, "and I never sit next to you, Polly."

"Oh!" cried Polly, "yes, you did, Joel Pepper, just the very last time I told stories."

"Well, that was just forever ago," said Joel, still holding David's arm, and showing no disposition to give up.

"Well, I think if Mamsie should come in now," warned Polly, for Mrs. Pepper had gone over to Grandma Bascom's — the old lady hav-

ing been sick for a day or two — and been caught there by the sudden shower, "and should see you, you'd feel badly, Joey."

At the mention of Mamsie, Joel's grasp on Davie's arm dropped, and he slunk back. Then Ben pulled him into a place next to him, quiet was restored, and Polly was soon launched on one of her wonderful stories, "Mr. Kangaroo and the silly little Duck," and presently they were all so absorbed that no one noticed the sun was shining brightly, until they heard a voice, "Well, I declare, sitting down in the day-time to tell stories!"

Polly sprang to her feet and stared.

"Ugh!" cried Joel, taking one look at their visitor.

"I should think," said Miss Jerusha, the minister's sister, in a very tart voice, and raising her black mitts very high, "that children as old as you are could find some work to do, without sitting down to fold your hands and tell good-for-nothing stories."

"They aren't good-for-nothing," shouted Joel. "You haven't heard 'em; they're just beautiful!"

"Be still, Joe," commanded Ben. But Joel broke away from him, and jumped to his feet.

"And Mamsie lets Polly tell us stories," he blurted out fiercely.

"Well, then, she's a very unwise woman," said Miss Jerusha, calmly seating herself in Mrs. Pepper's rocking chair.

"She ain't!" screamed Joel, quite beside himself with rage.

"Our mother's just right," said Ben, slowly getting to his feet. There was a light in his pale blue eyes as he bent them on Miss Jerusha, that made her look away a minute, but she soon returned to the charge. "*I* never was allowed to sit idle in the day-time," she said, "when I was a little girl."

"I don't believe you ever were little," said Joel, bluntly, and glaring at her across the kitchen.

"Joel, Joel!" cried Polly, in great distress. "Oh, please excuse him, Ma'am, he never talks so, and Mamsie will feel so very badly, when she knows it."

"I am very glad I came," said Miss Jerusha, sitting up stiff and tall, "for you children need some instruction, I can plainly see. Poor things! well, it's not to be wondered at, when we consider you've had no bringing up."

"We have had bringing up, Miss Jerusha," said Ben. "Children, you go into the bedroom, and shut the door, and stay there," he said to the three little ones. And never having seen him so before, the two boys went off wonderingly, without a word, and holding Phronsie by the hands. "Our mother is our mother," went on Ben, proudly, "the very best mother in all the world, and she's brought us up, oh, how she has worked to bring us up! and if we're naughty, it's all our own fault!" It was a long speech for Ben to make, and Polly stared at him in an amazement mingled with pride, while her breast heaved, and she clasped her hands tightly together, so afraid she should speak a word and spoil it all, for Miss Jerusha was really uncomfortable, that they could both see.

Meantime, Joel was climbing out of the bedroom window. "I'm goin' to Grandma Bascom's for Mamsie," he cried passionately.

"We must stay here, Phronsie," said little Davie, holding tightly to her hand, and standing still in the middle of the floor, "'cause Ben told us to, you know."

"Ugh!" they could hear Joel exclaim, as he jumped clear of the window sill to the grass

beneath; but they didn't know that the old cracked pane of glass had given away under his hand, nor that a little stream of blood was trickling down his wrist, as he raced over through the lane, and rushed into Grandma Bascom's little cottage.

XII

AT GRANDMA BASCOM'S

"THE land sakes!" exclaimed Grandma Bascom, seeing him first. She was propped up in bed, and Mrs. Pepper was heating some gruel on the stove out in the shed. "What's the matter?" as Joel held his arm out, and the blood was dripping down his little blouse.

"Nothin'," said Joel, shortly; "where's Mamsie?"

"Out in the shed," said Grandma. "Now you show her your arm as soon as you can."

"'Tisn't my arm," said Joel, "it's my hand," and he ran into the shed. "Come over home, Mamsie, do," he implored. "That old woman up to the minister's is at our house."

"I can't come," said Mrs. Pepper, not turning around, "till I fix Grandma comfortable. And for shame, Joel, to speak so of Miss Jerusha! Remember how good Parson Henderson is to us; and his wife, too."

"That ain't Miss Jerusha," said Joel, setting his teeth together, and wishing his hand wouldn't ache so; "and she's talking awful, and Ben's sent us all out."

"Then she must be disagreeable," said Mrs. Pepper, beginning to look worried. "Well, I'll soon have this done, then I'll be over. Ben'll have to bear it as best he can," and she sighed.

So Joel turned off and went out of doors, and the little stream of blood kept on trickling.

"Has he cut it bad?" asked Grandma, anxiously, when Mrs. Pepper brought in the cup of steaming gruel a few minutes later.

"Who?" asked Mother Pepper, absently.

"Why — Joel. Hain't you seen it?" screamed Grandma, who, like a great many deaf people, always spoke her loudest, especially when she was excited. "The blood was all runnin' like everything down his arm. I guess he's most cut it off," she added with a groan, for Grandma always had a warm spot in her heart for Joel.

Mrs. Pepper's face grew very pale, and she set the cup of gruel down hastily on the little stand by the bed-head, where Grandma could reach it. Then she hurried to the

door. "*Joel!*" she called, prepared to run over home if he didn't answer.

"What?" said a miserable little voice, as unlike Joel's as possible. There he sat crouching down under the big "laylocks," as Grandma always called them.

It wasn't a moment, then, before Mother Pepper had him in the kitchen and the blood washed off, and as well as she could see, for the little stream that flowed again, she found out where the trouble was, in the long zigzag cut down the fleshy part of Joel's little brown hand.

"Mother'll fix you up all right," she kept saying. And Joel, who didn't mind anything, now that he had Mamsie, watched every movement out of attentive black eyes.

"Has he cut it bad? O dear me!" shouted and groaned Grandma from the bed.

"No," screamed Joel, "'tain't hurt at all."

"Oh, Joey!" reproved Mrs. Pepper, tying up the poor hand in a bit of old cloth. "Now run in and show Grandma, and I'll ask her if she has got any court plaster."

So Joel ran in and sat on the edge of Grandma's bed, on top of the gay patched quilt, and recounted just how it all happened.

"Hey?" exclaimed Grandma, every minute.

"I can't make her hear nothin'," said Joel at last, in despair, turning to his mother. "What gets into folks' ears to make 'em deaf, Mamsie?"

"Oh, it often comes on when they're old," answered Mrs. Pepper, who had been searching all this time in all the cracked bowls and cups for the scraps of court plaster. "It will be such a piece of work to get her to tell me where it is," she said to herself.

"I ain't ever goin' to be deaf when I'm old," declared Joel, in alarm.

"You don't know whether you will or not," said Mrs. Pepper, rummaging away, "so you better use your ears to good advantage now, while you've got 'em."

"I'll always have 'em," said Joel, putting up both hands to feel of those appendages and see if they were there. "I guess they can't get off," and he shook his head smartly.

"How'd you cut it?" asked Grandma, shrilly, for the fiftieth time.

Joel slipped off the gay patched bedquilt, and ran up to his mother, drawing a long breath.

"O dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Pepper, seeing the bandage of old cloth, which was quite

red and damp. "Go and sit down and hold your hand still. I must ask Grandma where that court plaster is. I know she has some, because when Polly cut her finger, you know, Grandma gave her a piece."

"You can't make her hear," said Joel, despairingly, and sitting down as his mother bade.

"I must," said Mrs. Pepper, firmly; "and if a thing has to be done, why it has to be, that's all; we've got to have that court plaster."

So she put her ear close to Grandma's cap-border, and after a great deal of explaining on Mother Pepper's part, and as many interruptings on Grandma Bascom's, who wanted everything said over again, at last it was known that the court plaster lay between the leaves of the big Bible, on the stand under the old looking-glass between the windows.

"I put it there so's to have it handy," screamed Grandma, leaning back in great satisfaction against her pillows again.

Mrs. Pepper, feeling quite worn out, got the court plaster and cut off a piece. "Now then, Joel," she said, coming up to him.

"The cloth's all wet and soppy," said Joel, beginning to twitch at the bandage.

"Don't do that, Joey," commanded Mother Pepper, quickly, "you'll make it bleed worse'n ever. Dear me! I should think it was wet!" suppressing a shiver, as she rapidly unwound the old cloth, now very red. "Come here, over the basin." And presently the poor hand was washed off again with warm water, the long cut closed, and the strip of black court plaster stuck firmly over the wound.

"Why don't you put cold water on, Mammy?" asked Joel; "it would feel so good."

"Is it cut bad?" Grandma kept screaming.

"You can go and let her see it, Joey, now that it's all done up nicely. There's no use in trying to tell her," said Mother Pepper, clearing away the traces of the accident. So Joel hopped up on the big bed again and displayed his wounded hand, and Grandma oh-ed and dear me-ed over it, and then she reached over to the little drawer in the stand at the head of the bed.

"Put your hand in, Joel," she said, "and take as many's you want."

Joel's black eyes stuck out as he saw the big peppermint drops, pink ones and white ones, rolling round in the drawer the minute it was pulled open. "Can I have as many as I want,

Grandma?" he screamed, hopping off from the bed to hang over the drawer.

"Yes," said Grandma, delighted to think she could do something to help, "'cause you've hurt your hand."

"I'm glad I hurt it!" exclaimed Joel. "O my! what a lot, Grandma!" which Grandma didn't hear, only she knew he was pleased by the sight of his chubby face; so she smi'ed, too.

Mrs. Pepper found them so when she came up to the bed.

"I'm going home now, Grandma," she said. "I'll be over again by and by, or Polly will."

"Hey?" said Grandma. So Mrs. Pepper nodded and smiled and pointed to the door, and Grandma seemed satisfied.

"She told me I might have as many's I wanted," said Joel, with great satisfaction. "I like Grandma ever so much."

"Take care, Joey, you don't take too many," said Mrs. Pepper. "Grandma's good to you, so you must be good to her, and come right home from here. You may stay half an hour," pointing to the old clock. "Miss Jerusha will be gone by that time," she said to herself with a grim smile.

"I'll come right home, Mamsie," said Joel, quite upset in his mind whether to take two white peppermint drops and two pink ones, or if it would do to take three apiece.

"And don't let any cold water get on that hand," charged Mrs. Pepper the last thing.

"Why, Mamsie?" asked Joel, looking up.

"'Cause it would be very bad," said Mother Pepper, shaking her head warningly, "very bad, Joel. Remember, now."

"What would it do to me?" asked Joel.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Pepper; "it might almost kill you to chill it. Maybe you'd have lockjaw, Joel Pepper."

"What's that?" demanded Joel, deserting the peppermint drops for a minute to run to the door and seize his mother's gown. "What's lockjaw, Mammy?"

"I guess you'd find out if you had it," said Mrs. Pepper, grimly. "Why, you can't open your jaws. Let go of my gown, Joel. I must hurry home." And with visions of Miss Jerusha in the little brown house, she hurried off as fast as she could down the lane.

"Huh!" exclaimed Joel, left quite alone staring after her. "I guess I ain't going to have

any old lockjaw. And I could open my jaws, too." Thereupon wide apart flew his two sets of white teeth, at such a distance that he seemed to be all mouth. Then he snapped them together again so quickly that it made him wink violently; repeating this operation till he was quite convinced that nothing should ever be the matter with his jaws. "And if they ever do get locked up, I'm goin' to keep the key myself." Then he ran back to his peppermint drops again, quite satisfied. Grandma Bascom was sound asleep.

Joel softly moved two pink peppermint drops over to one side of the drawer, and set two white ones next to them. "They're awful small," he said to himself, and changed the pink ones for two others of the same color. Then the same thought occurring to him in regard to the white ones, those had to go back and two different white ones take their places. Then he drew back, and gazed at them admiringly.

"I don't s'pose Mamsie'd care if I took one more, if 'twas a little one," he presently thought. But the difficulty was, should it be a pink one or a white one? It took Joel so long to decide

this, that at last he put one of each over in his collection at the side of the drawer, then hastily pushed the rest of Grandma's into a pile at one end. "There, she's got a lot," he exclaimed. And as he looked at them, the pile seemed to grow bigger yet; so he picked off one, a great pink drop, from the very top.

"Now I must get a white one to match it," he said, fumbling over the pile till he had flattened it quite out. They looked so many more when this was done, that Joel felt quite right in extracting the last two. "It might a' made her sick. P'r'aps she's been eating too many." And as this thought struck him, he pulled out two more, picked up the ones he had set to one side, slammed to the drawer, by this time realizing that Grandma could not hear, and ran out of the bedroom to the "laylock" bushes, where he sat down to enjoy the peppermint drops.

He had demolished the third one, eating as slowly as possible, in a way Phronsie had of nibbling around the edges to make it last as long as possible; and then, with his cut hand, there wasn't anything he could do; when suddenly Mamsie's words, "Be good to Grandma," swept through his mind, with an awful twinge.

Joel stopped eating and looked at the heap of pink and white peppermint drops he had laid down on the grass by his side; then turned his back to them, and began his nibbling again. "She's got enough," he said, munching on. "She said, take as many's I wanted. So there now!"

But in a minute he had hopped to his feet, and snatched up the pink and white pile, raced through the kitchen and into the bedroom, and twitching open the drawer to the little stand, he dumped his fistful in, all except one. Then, without trusting himself to look at them, he slammed the drawer quite tight, and leaning over Grandma, he put his mouth close to her cap-border where she lay snoring away. "I put 'em all back, Grandma," he whispered, "except four."

Something made him glance up at the old clock. It was five minutes past the half hour, and Joel, with a dreadful feeling at his heart, for disobedience was a thing Mamsie never overlooked, fled over to the little brown house.

XIII

PASSENGERS FOR THE BOXFORD STAGE

"I DECLARE, that's fine!" said Ben, the next day. It was dull and cloudy, and he squinted up at the sky. "There isn't a bit of wind. Now Mr. Blodgett'll have that bonfire, I guess; that'll suit you, Joe, as you can't have much fun with that hand."

Joel squealed right out. "That's prime! And I can pile in the sticks and straw just as well with my other hand."

"You aren't goin' to touch that bonfire, once it's lighted," declared Ben, in his most decided way. "Now you remember that, Joe Pepper!"

"There ain't any good in it, if I can't help," cried Joel, horribly disappointed.

"You can see it," said Ben, "same's David."

"Hoh! what's that!" cried Joel; "that won't be any fun."

"Then you can stay at home," said Ben, coolly. "As for having you, Joe, careering round that fire, and cutting up your capers, we

ain't goin' to let you. Like enough you'd be half burnt up."

"Phoo!" cried Joel, in high disdain, and snapping the fingers of his well hand, "I wouldn't get afire."

"I wouldn't trust you. You'd be afire before you knew it. You needn't tease, Joe; Mamsie wouldn't allow it." And Ben walked off and shut the door.

"Ben never let's me do anything," howled Joel, twisting his face up into a dreadful knot, and wishing there was something he could do with his left hand, for the other was all tied up in a sling, Mother Pepper wisely concluding that to be the only way to keep it still. "If I tie it up, Joel, you can't use it," she had said, fastening the broad strip of white cloth firmly over his shoulder. And Joel, knowing there was no use in protesting, had borne it as well as he could, making Davie wait on him, and driving Polly almost to despair in her efforts to amuse him, while she did up the morning work, Mother Pepper being away.

"Why don't you play stage-coach, Joel?" proposed Polly now, as Joel couldn't vent his disappointment loudly enough.

"That's no fun, with one hand," said Joel, disconsolately, drumming on the window pane.

"Some folks always drive with their left hand," said Polly.

"Mr. Tisbett doesn't," said Joel, gloomily regarding the bunch of white cloth that covered his right hand. "He always drives with this one," sticking it out, "'cept when he takes both."

"Well, you can play there's been an accident, and you got hurt, and so you had to drive with that hand," said Polly.

"So I can," cried Joel, bounding away from the window, "so I can, Polly Pepper. I'll have it right now, and it's to be a perfectly awful one. Come on, Dave, let's fix up the coach, and you get inside, and I'll upset you, and most smash everything to death." And Joel ran hither and thither, dragging the chairs, and Phronsie's little cricket, and everything movable into place as well as he could with one hand.

"Take care, Joe," warned Polly, wondering if she hadn't done wrong in proposing stage-coach, "don't fly round so. You'll hurt your hand. I'd get up on the front seat if I were you, and begin to drive."

"Would you have the horses run into something, Polly, kersmash," cried Joel, tugging at Mamsie's rocking chair to bring it into line, "or make the stage-coach tumble over and roll down hill?"

"Dear me," cried Polly, going into the pantry to mix up her brown bread, and wondering which would be the less of the two evils, "I'm sure I don't know, Joel."

"I'm goin' to have 'em do both," decided Joel. "Dave, pull this up, will you?" So little David ran and gave a lift on the other side of the big rocking chair, to haul it into place. We'll run into somethin' an' th' horse'll shy, and that'll make the old stage-coach roll down hill. Gee-whickets!" he brought up, in huge delight.

"I shan't let you play it at all," said Polly, from the pantry, "if you say such words, Joel. You'll just have to stop and go and sit down. So remember."

Joel was clambering up into Mr. Tisbett's seat on the box, but he ducked his head at Polly's rebuke. "Get in, Dave," he shouted, recovering himself. "Hurry up. You're the passenger that wants to go to Boxford. You're

awful slow. I'll drive off without you if you don't make haste," he threatened, gathering up in his left hand the bits of string that were fastened to a nail in the corner of the shelf.

Little David, feeling it a dreadful calamity to be left behind when he wanted to go to Boxford, hopped nimbly into the opening in the pile of chairs that represented the stage-coach, and off they drove.

"I can't hold my whip," cried Joel in distress, after a minute or so of bowling along on the road to Boxford, accompanied with much shouting to Mr. Tisbett's pair of black horses, and excitement generally as the stage-driver tried to get out of the way of the great number of teams on the turnpike. "O dear, it ain't any fun without the whip!" and the whole establishment came to a dead stop.

"I'll hold the whip," cried the passenger, eagerly, poking his head out of the stage-coach window.

"No, you won't, either," cried Joel. "You're the passenger. O dear me, there ain't any fun without th' whip!"

"Then I can drive," said little David. "Do let me, Joel," he pleaded.

"I won't either," declared Joel, flatly. "I'm Mr. Tisbett, and besides, there won't be anybody inside if you get up here."

"Phronsie might be passenger," said David, reflecting a moment.

"Goody, oh, so she might!" cried Joel, "and Seraphina too. And that'll make more upset. Then you may come up here, Dave," he promised. But when Polly was made acquainted with this fine plan, she refused to allow Phronsie to enter into such a noisy play. And Joel's face dropped so dismally that she was at her wits' end to know how to straighten out the trouble. Just then one of the Henderson boys came up to the door with a little pat of butter in a dish for Mrs. Pepper.

"Here comes Peletiah Henderson," announced Polly, catching sight of him through the window. "Now, p'r'aps he can stop and play with you, Joel."

"He ain't much good to play," answered Joel, who never seemed to be able to wake up the quiet boy to much action.

"Oh, Joel, he'll play real pretty, I guess," said Polly, reprovingly, "and he's such a good boy."

"He might be the passenger," said Joel,

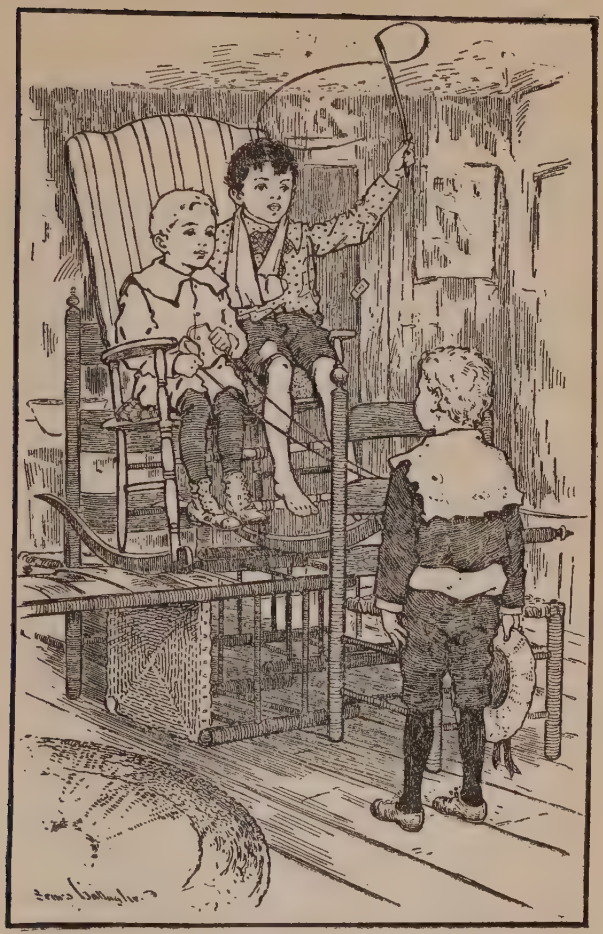
thinking busily, as Polly ran to the door to let the Henderson boy in. "We'll play he's the minister goin' over to preach in Boxford, and we'll upset him just before he gets there. Jump out, Dave, and get up here."

"I don't know as we ought to upset him if he's the minister," objected David, doubtfully, as he clambered up to Joel's side. Still, a perfect thrill of delight seized him at his promotion to the seat of honor, and his little hands trembled as Joel laid the precious whip within them.

"No, I guess I'd rather you had the reins," decided Joel, twitching away the whip to lay the bits of string in David's little brown hands. "You can drive first, 'cause I want to crack the whip awful loud as we start. And then I'll take 'em again."

David, who would much rather have cracked the whip, said nothing, feeling it bliss enough to be up there on the box and doing something, as Peletiah, a light-haired, serious boy, walked slowly into the kitchen.

"You're the passenger," shouted Joel at him, and cracking his whip, "and you're going over to Boxford. Hurry up and get into the stage-coach. I'm Mr. Tisbett."



"'YOU'RE THE PASSENGER!' SHOUTED JOEL"

"And I'm helping, Peletiah," cried David, turning a very pink and happy face down toward him.

"I don't want to go to Boxford," said Peletiah, deliberately, and standing quite still, while Polly ran into the pantry to slip the little pat of butter on to another plate.

"Oh, how good it looks!" she said, longing for just one taste.

"Well, you've got to go," said Joel, obstinately, "so get in."

"I don't want to go to Boxford," repeated Peletiah, not stirring.

Joel cracked the whip angrily, and glared down at him.

"P'r'aps he wants to go somewhere else," said little David, leaning forward and clutching the reins carefully, "and that'll be just as good."

"Do you?" asked Joel, crossly. "Want to go anywheres else, Peletiah?"

Peletiah considered so long over this that Joel, drumming with his heels on the dashboard, got tired out, and shouted, "Hurry up and get in — th' stage-coach's goin'!" which had the desired effect, to make the passenger skip in much livelier than he intended.

"Now we're goin' to Boxford," announced Joel, positively, cracking his whip at its loudest. "Be careful, David; hold the horses up."

"He said he didn't want to go to Boxford," put in little David, trembling all over at the vast responsibility of holding in Mr. Tisbett's black horses, and the passenger's being taken where he didn't want to go.

"Well, he didn't tell us where he did want to go," said Joel, "and th' stage is goin' to Boxford. Boxford, Box," he screamed to imaginary people along the road. "Anybody want to go to Boxford?"

"I said I didn't want to go to Boxford," interrupted the passenger in the general din.

"Well, you've got to," said Joel, "'cause the stage is goin' there. Boxford — Boxford! Anybody goin' to Boxford? Want to go, Marm?" an imaginary old woman sitting on a stone by the roadside.

"I'm goin' to get out," announced Peletiah, in a tone that convinced Joel that remonstrance was useless.

"No, you mustn't," cried Joel, "and you can't, either, for th' accident's comin' now," he added cheerfully.

Davie held his breath, and clutched the lines tighter yet, and Joel screamed shrilly, "Look out!" and gave an awful kick with his heels to the back of the top chair, and before anybody could say a word, over it came, knocking Davie with it, and before the passenger could get out, Mr. Tisbett and his assistant and the best part of the whole establishment seemed to be on top of him.

Polly heard the noise and came rushing out. "Oh, boys — boys!" she cried in a fright, "are you hurt?" for everything seemed to be in a heap together, with some small legs kicking wildly about, trying to extricate the persons to whom they belonged.

"I ain't," announced Joel, hopping out of the heaps and shaking the black hair out of his eyes. "Oh, Polly, it was such fun!" he cried.

"Davie! Davie and Peletiah!" cried Polly, an awful dread at her heart, on account of the little guest, as she hung over the wreck, pulling busily at the chairs, "are you all safe?"

Little David tried to speak, but his head ached dreadfully, and the breath seemed to have left his body. Peletiah said slowly, "I

barked my shin, and I didn't want to go to Boxford."

"O dear me," exclaimed Polly, fishing him out, "that's too bad! Joel, you oughtn't to have taken him to Boxford if he didn't want to go."

"That wouldn't 'a' made any difference," declared Joel, "'cause we had to get upset, anyway."

"Well, Davie's hurt, I expect," said Polly, looking Peletiah carefully all over, as in duty bound to a guest, as he stood up before her.

"Oh, no, I ain't, Polly," said little David, trying to speak cheerfully, and crawling out with a big lump on his forehead.

"O dear me!" exclaimed Polly, at sight of it. "Well, I'm glad, child, it's no worse," as she rapidly examined the rest of him. "Now you must have some pieces of wet brown paper on that."

"I'm glad I haven't got to have wet brown paper all over me," declared Joel, with a grimace — "old, slippery, shiny brown paper."

"I barked my shin," gravely announced Peletiah, standing quite still.

"Oh, so you did," cried Polly, with a remorse-

ful twinge. "Now you must wait, Davie, till I fix Peletiah up, for he's company, you know."

"I guess Grandma's got some wormwood — the stuff she made for Phronsie's toe when 'twas pounded," suggested Joel, quite oblivious to the black looks which Peletiah was constantly casting on him.

"You may run over and see," said Polly. "O dear me, no, you can't, Joe, just look at your hand!" as she happened to glance up.

Joel looked down quickly at the big white bundle in the sling. "There ain't nothin' —" He was going to say, "the matter with my hand, Polly," when he saw some very red spots spreading quickly along its surface.

"Oh, now you've burst open the cut," cried Polly, forgetting herself, and turning quite white. "What shall we do, and Mamsie away!"

Little David, at that, burst into a loud cry, and Joel tried to say, "No, I haven't," but looking very scared at Polly's scream.

"Oh, I'll fix it, Joe," she exclaimed in haste, though how she managed to get the words out she never knew. "Let me see, Mamsie would untie it if she were here, and put on court

plaster. Now, David, you run over to Grandma's and ask her to give us some more. She told us to come if we wanted it, and I'll put on a fresh piece just as tight, oh, you can't think!" Polly kept talking all the time, feeling that she should drop if she didn't, and little David, forgetting all about the lump on his forehead, that now was most as big as an egg, ran off as fast as he could, and presently returned with the court plaster, waving it over his head.

Polly took off the bloody rag, setting her lips tightly together, until she saw Joel's face again. Then she began quickly, "Oh, what a nice time you're goin' to have at the bonfire, Joe!"

"Is there goin' to be a bonfire?" asked Peletiah, with more interest than he had hitherto shown.

"Yes," said Polly, "there is, Peletiah. Mr. Blodgett's goin' to burn up all that rubbish left after he pulled down his cow-pen, you know."

"When's he goin' to burn it?" continued Peletiah.

"This afternoon," said Polly. Ben's over there, and Joel's goin', and David." All the while she was dabbing off the blood running

out of the side where the court plaster slipped when the stage went over. Then she cut off another bit from the piece Grandma sent over, and quickly pasted it over the edge of the old piece. "There now, Joey," she cried, "that's as nice as can be! Now I'll get you a fresh piece of cloth to tie it up in."

"I don't want it tied up," cried Joel, wiggling his fingers; "they feel so good to be out, Polly."

"Oh, you must have 'em tied up," cried Polly, decisively, running back with the cloth. "Hold your hand still, Joe; there now, says I, that's all done!" She gave a great sigh of relief, when at last Joel's arm was once more in its sling.

"I'm glad it's all back again, Polly," said little David, viewing the white bundle with satisfaction.

"So am I, I declare," said Polly, folding her hands to rest a bit.

"I guess I'll go to that bonfire," observed Peletiah. At the sound of his voice, Polly came to herself with a little gasp. "Oh, I forgot all about you, Peletiah, and David's head. I'll see your shin first, 'cause you're company."

When Peletiah's small trouser leg was pulled up, Polly saw with dismay a black and blue spot

rapidly spreading. "O dear me," she cried, down on her knees, "what will dear Mrs. Henderson say? and she's so good to us!"

"And I didn't want to go to Boxford, either," said Peletiah.

"Well, David, you must just run back and ask Grandma if we may have a little wormwood," said Polly. "I'd go, but I don't like to leave you children alone," in distress as she saw Davie's lump on his forehead, and his hot, tired face. "I'm sorry, for you've just been over."

"I'll go," cried Joel, springing off, but Polly called him back.

"No, you can't, Joe," she cried, "you'll burst that cut open again, maybe. Davie must go. Tell Grandma one of the minister's boys has got hurt."

So Davie ran over again, trying not to think how his head ached, and in he came in a few minutes with the bunch of wormwood dangling at his side.

"She said — Grandma did — pound it up and tie it on with a rag, if you haven't got time to steep it," said Davie, relinquishing the bundle into Polly's hand, "and to put some on my head, too," he added, feeling this to be a calam-

ity as much worse as could be imagined than to have on the brown paper bits.

"So I will," declared Polly. "Oh, how good of Grandma! Boys, we must do ever and all we can for her, she's so nice to us. Now I must pound this up, just as she said."

This operation was somewhat delayed by all three of the boys hanging over her and getting in the way. And Phronsie, who had been busy with Seraphina in the bedroom, now running out to add herself to the number, it was a little time before Peletiah's small leg had the wet rag tied on.

"Well, now you're done," said Polly, thankfully, "and you'd better run home, Peletiah, and tell your mother all about it, and how sorry we are."

"Yes," said Peletiah, slowly moving off, "I will, 'cause she told me to come right back."

"Oh, Peletiah!" exclaimed Polly, in horror, "and you've been here all this time!"

"And I didn't want to go to Boxford," said Peletiah, going off. Pretty soon, back he came, just as Polly finished bathing Davie's head. "I'll take the dish," he said. "Mother said bring it back."

XIV

DEACON BLODGETT'S BONFIRE

BUT that afternoon it began to rain smartly, so nobody went to the bonfire after all. "P'r'aps," Polly had kept saying to herself, "all Mr. Atkins' sacks will be sewed up by the next time Mr. Blodgett tries to burn up his rubbish, and then I can go," but she didn't speak a word to her mother, for then Mrs. Pepper would find out how dreadfully disappointed Polly had been at the thought of not seeing the grand spectacle. So she worked on busily, expecting every day to hear Ben say, "Now we're goin' to set it off to-day," for he was at work pretty steadily now, for Farmer Blodgett. But he never did.

At last one day, Ben came home very late to supper, so late that Polly ran to the window ever so many times, exclaiming, "Bensie never was so late before." Phronsie had long been in bed, and the boys were anxiously looking up at the clock to see if it were anywhere near half-past seven, when Ben came in.

"Why, Ben Pepper!" exclaimed Polly, aghast, "whatever is the matter?"

"I should ask so, too," said Mother Pepper, "only I know Ben will tell when he is rested. Let him eat his supper, Polly, and don't bother him with questions."

So Polly took off the clean towel that had covered Ben's supper on the table, and hovered over him, watching every mouthful. But she didn't say a word.

"You see," said Ben, when he had appeased his appetite somewhat, and eating more slowly, "I really couldn't help it, for the bonfire was such a big one."

"The bonfire?" screamed Polly. "What do you mean, Ben?"

"Why, Mr. Blodgett's bonfire, to be sure," said Ben. "Whatever else could I mean, Polly?" leaning back to look over his shoulder at her.

"You haven't gone and had that bonfire without telling us, Ben Pepper!" cried Polly, in amazement. "Oh, how could you do such a dreadful mean thing!" she added passionately.

"Polly — Polly!" cried Mother Pepper, in dismay.

"Well, I don't care," said Polly, recklessly,

"it was perfectly awfully mean, Mamsie, to go and have that bonfire without telling us a single thing about it. Now we can't one of us ever see it," she mourned.

"Better not judge Ben till you hear the reason, Polly," advised Mother Pepper, gravely. "I'll warrant he had some good one."

"So I have," cried Ben, with a dreadful feeling at his heart that his comrade Polly blamed him. "Mr. Blodgett told me I mustn't run home and tell you, though I begged him as hard as I could to let me."

"Then he is a very mean man," exploded Polly, with flashing eyes and a little red spot on either cheek.

"Take care, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper.

"I don't think so," said Ben, decidedly, shaking his head in disapproval of Polly; "he's been as good as gold to me, and —"

"So he has, Ben," Mother Pepper was guilty of interrupting.

"And he's been bothered to death to get the right time to work on that old bonfire, and to-day the men said the rubbish ought to be got off, 'cause two of 'em can come only a day more, and they want to get the ground ready for plant-

ing. So all of a sudden Mr. Blodgett comes over to the south meadow and calls out, 'Come, boys, we're going to set to on that bonfire!' And then I begged him to let me just run home and tell you all, and he couldn't, and that's all," said Ben, calmly finishing the account.

"I don't see how you could help it, Ben," said his mother, "nor Mr. Blodgett either, for that matter."

Polly stood quite still, the waves of color spreading over her face. Then she took a step forward, and threw her arms around Ben's neck.

"Oh, Ben!" she cried convulsively, "I'm so sorry I was cross."

"All right, Polly," said Ben, reassuringly, and patting her cheek, "and I guess next time you'll wait and hear about things."

"I surely will," promised poor Polly.

So no one saw the wonderful Blodgett bonfire, after all, except Peletiah Henderson, who was going past that farm when the excitement was at its height. But Ben comforted them all, and Polly helped out wonderfully, by repeating everything he said. "Now, children, I'll watch; there'll be other bonfires, I expect. Maybe before long; so I shouldn't wonder if

we got another chance to see a big fire." It came sooner than they expected, but it wasn't a bonfire.

It was one night about a week after. The little brown house was as still as a mouse, everybody abed and asleep. Suddenly Phronsie woke up with a fretful little cry. "I want a drink of water," she wailed, sitting straight in the trundle bed.

"Oh, no, you don't," said Polly, sleepily. "Hush, Phronsie, and lie down again. You'll wake Mamsie."

Phronsie's little lips quivered. In the darkness Polly couldn't see the small face and its sorrowful eyes, so she turned over again on her pillow. "Go to sleep, like a good girl," she said, almost asleep.

"I can't, Polly," said Phronsie, almost ready to cry out, "and I am truly thirsty. Please, Polly, a drink of water." She put out her little hand to feel for Polly's, but in a minute the regular breathing told her that Polly had fallen asleep. So Phronsie sat still in the middle of the trundle bed, and choked back the tears.

But her little throat was parched and dry,

and at last the tears rolled over the round cheeks.

"I won't wake poor Polly up," she said; "I can get it myself," and she crawled out of the trundle bed, having some difficulty in getting over the side, and made her way out into the kitchen. It was very bright there, at which Phronsie stared wonderingly, as there was no candle lighted, so she easily found her way to the pail of water which Ben always got the last thing at night and set on the bench by the window.

"I can reach the dipper," said Phronsie, standing on tiptoes, and seizing it, she thrust it into the pail. How it happened, she didn't know, and there was no one else there to see, but over with a great clatter came the pail and the dipper to the floor.

Polly started up in bed. Mamsie, who was very tired, still slept on. "Phronsie," cried Polly, remembering in a flash about the drink of water, "I'll get it for you," and she put out her hand to pat the little figure in the trundle bed. There was no Phronsie there!

Polly hopped wildly out into the kitchen, to hear Phronsie gurgling out her distress, as she

stood in her little white nightie, her hands stuck straight out, and the water dripping from her every pore. The pail and dipper were rolling away at their own sweet wills across the old kitchen floor. And over all shone a great light as bright as day, only it was tinged with red.

"Phronsie Pepper!" exclaimed Polly, and "What's this light?" all in the same breath. And huddling Phronsie up in her arms, Polly raced along to the window. A great burst of light, red and glaring, shot across the sky, and lighted up the whole heavens.

"Oh, we're burning up! Something's afire! Grandma Bascom!" screamed Polly. "Ben — Ben — wake up! Mamsie! Fire — fire!" she called.

She could hear Ben spring out of bed, and Mrs. Pepper was in the kitchen in a minute, and Joel and David were tumbling downstairs at Ben's heels, and they all threw on their clothes and rushed out of doors. But it wasn't Grandma Bascom's. Her little cottage stood peaceful and quiet, with only the dreadful red light playing over it.

"I can't think where it is," said Ben. "It

seems so near, and we know it isn't, 'cause Grandma's is the only house for more'n half a mile." Meanwhile, the smoke was pouring into the sky, and when it cleared there was that dreadful red light glare again.

"Oh, Ben!" exclaimed Polly, with clasped hands, as they all stood in front of the little brown house, breathlessly watching, "it must be Parson Henderson's."

"No," said Ben, "that isn't the right direction."

"It's nice Mrs. Beebe's, I know," said Joel, racing around excitedly. "And now it will burn up all those boots and shoes," which, luckily, Phronsie didn't hear.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Ben, "it isn't anywhere near Mr. Beebe's shop. It's ever so far off. And a barn, I guess, 'cause it burns like hay."

"I hope there aren't any horses in it," sighed Polly, with a shiver, sitting down on the doorstone, and holding Phronsie very closely in her arms.

"Wherever it is, you ought to go and help, Ben," said his mother.

"I was thinking so myself, now I know 'tisn't

near here, and I can leave you all," said Ben, hurrying off.

"I'm goin', I'm goin'," cried Joel, wildly darting off.

"No — no, Joel," said Mrs. Pepper, "you're too little to go to a fire."

"I'd pass buckets," said Joel, "and climb the ladders — and — "

"No," said his mother, firmly.

He was afraid to cry, lest she should send him in the house, so he ran out into the road and watched impatiently to see if anybody was coming along to go to the fire. Presently they all heard wagon wheels.

"Somebody's comin'!" screamed Joel, running back into the yard. "Oh, Mammy, mayn't I ride with 'em and just see the fire? I won't get out of the wagon; truly, I won't."

"No," said Mrs. Pepper, "it's no use to ask it, Joel," and he knew it wasn't. "It's hard enough to let Ben go, though that's his duty. You can ask the people in the wagon if they know where the fire is." And Joel, delighted that there was some part in the excitement for him, tore madly down to the roadside and demanded this of the people in the team.

"It's Deacon Blodgett's barn," they screamed at him as the old horse spun by, raising a cloud of dust.

"What did he say?" asked Mrs. Pepper, as Joel raced back breathlessly.

"It's Deacon Blodgett's barn," screamed Joel, quite overcome. "O dear me! So we are seeing his bonfire, ain't we, Mammy?"

"Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, her face looking ghastly in the red light, "this is perfectly dreadful for poor Mrs. Blodgett and the good deacon. Oh, if we could only help them!" She looked off at the clouds of smoke now obscuring the red glare, and her hands usually so quiet were wringing each other.

"Ben's there by this time," said Polly, feeling that nothing was hopeless with Ben close by. "Think of that, Mamsie."

"I'm so glad of that," breathed Mrs. Pepper, thankfully. "Now he'll have a chance to show his gratitude for what Deacon Blodgett's done for him."

"Polly," said Phronsie, suddenly raising her head where she had hidden it on Polly's arm, "do you suppose Mr. Blodgett's nice mooly cow is going to burn up?" She clasped her

fat hands as she brought out the question fearfully.

"No, I hope not, Pet," said Polly, soothingly. "Don't let's think of it," but her heart ached, nevertheless. How good Mrs. Blodgett had been to send down that sweet, rich milk, once in a while, for Phronsie.

"See! Oh, ain't it a buster!" shouted Joel out in the road, hoping some other team would come by.

"Joel," called Mrs. Pepper, even in her anxiety over good friends' trouble, unwilling to let the word pass, "what did you say?"

"Well, it's a big fire, anyway," said Joel. "Come on, Dave, out here and see it," for Dave, at the first glimpse, had slunk down on the grass silently to watch the sky.

"No," said little David, "I don't want to go, Joel. Mamsie —" and he turned a troubled face to her — "do you suppose God's going to let good Mr. Blodgett's barn burn up?"

"No," said Mrs. Pepper, "I don't b'lieve God had anything to do with it, Davie. Like enough it's some man been in there with a pipe, but we'll hope the fire'll be put out. And don't you be troubled; God wouldn't let any one be

hurt, least of all a good man like Deacon Blodgett."

"Oh," said little David, quite relieved.

And when Ben came home in the early dawn — Mamsie and the rest of the bunch of the little Peppers sitting up for him, for Phronsie wouldn't go to bed, so Polly held her in her arms — they found this was just the case.

"And they've caught the tramp who was smoking the pipe," cried Ben, excitedly, "but that won't save the barn, and the horse and — "

"Hush!" cried Polly, with a look at Phronsie. But her eyes were closed, and her head was bobbing sleepily on Polly's breast.

"Better lay her on my bed now, Polly," said her mother, "and she'll doze off, most likely."

"Yes, the cow has gone with the rest of the tools and wagons," said Ben, mixing things up inextricably. "O dear me!" And he rested his streaked face on his grimy hands.

"Oh, Ben," cried Joel, "you're as black as you can be! How I wish I could 'a' gone!" he added, feeling it the highest state of bliss to come home looking like that from working in a fire.

"Well, I feel black," said Ben, and down went his head lower yet in his hands.

His mother went swiftly over to him and pressed her hand gently on his hair. "You couldn't help it, Ben," she said, "you'd 'a' saved it, if you'd been able."

"Yes," said Ben, brokenly, "I would, Mamsie."

XV

OLD MAN PETERS' CENT

JOEL was walking along the road very slowly, swinging on his arm the tin pail that was to bring home the molasses. "I wish some one would come along who'd give me a ride," he thought, feeling hot, and wishing he were home, to lie on the cool grass in the orchard, after he had first drunk all he wanted to at the well.

"I could drink the whole bucketful," he declared. "My, ain't I thirsty! Oh, goody, I hear a wagon!" and he hopped to one side of the road. "Ugh — it's old man Peters!"

Mr. Peters slackened up as he passed Joel, but he didn't offer to let him ride. And Joel didn't want to, anyway. After a grumpy look at the Pepper boy, the old man in the wagon put the well-worn leather reins between his knees and took out a battered pocket-book, scowling above its contents as he went over a business transaction just completed at Badger-

town. Then he slapped it together and stuck it into his pocket, and seizing the reins, he doubled them up, cutting the horse across the thin flanks.

"Gee-lang, there — will you!" cried old man Peters, shrilly, "or I'll make ye!"

Joel stepped back into the middle of the road, and began to trudge along in the wake of the wagon. Suddenly he stopped, and stared at something shining in the road. It was little and round, but it sent up a bright gleam that found an answering one in Joel's black eyes.

"Oh, I've found a whole cent!" he exclaimed joyfully. Then his heart stood quite still. It must belong to old man Peters.

"I don't care," said Joel, defiantly, to himself, "he left it in the road. It's mine, now, for I picked it up." And he clutched it tightly in his warm little palm, and dug his heels into the hot sand, glad enough he had had to go to the store after that molasses, for otherwise he wouldn't have found that cent.

"It doesn't belong to you." It seemed as if Mamsie was walking there beside him, and had said the words, and involuntarily Joel glanced on either side.

"I don't know as he dropped it," he said to himself, walking very fast, and trying to shake off the unwelcome thoughts; "I didn't see him."

"But you did see him take his pocket-book out, and you ought to hurry after him and give it back," and Joel started on a lively run, without giving himself a chance to think twice.

"Mr. Peters! Mr. Peters!" he cried, running along, and screaming after the retreating wagon.

Mr. Peters looked back and shook his whip at him. "I ain't a-goin' to give you a ride," he said, "an' you needn't think you can catch on behind." So he gave the horse another cut, that made him amble along at his best speed.

Joel chased as long as he was able to, the perspiration streaming from his red face, screaming when he could find breath, "Stop, Mr. Peters, a minute," till Mr. Peters shook his fist at him as well as his whip. At last Joel dropped from sheer exhaustion on the roadside grass.

"That Pepper boy — th' one they call Joel — is a perfect nuisance," snarled Mr. Peters, after putting his horse up in the barn, and going into the house. "I passed him on the road, and he

looked as if he 'xpected me to give him a lift."

"Oh, Pa, why didn't you?" said Mrs. Peters, pityingly, "they have such a hard time, those little Pepperses. I s'pose he was dreadful tired."

"S'pose he was," said Mr. Peters, going into the keeping room to sit down over the weekly paper. "I warn't a-goin' to take him up; and then the imperdent little chap started to run after me, a-yellin' all the way. I'd a horse-whipped him if I c'd 'a' reached him."

"I wish you wouldn't feel so about boys," deprecatingly said his wife, a little woman; "they don't hurt you none, and I wish you wouldn't, Pa."

"Well, I ain't a-goin' to have 'em round me," snarled Mr. Peters. "An' there ain't no call for you to say any more about 's fur's I know, Marindy," and he jerked open the newspaper, put his feet on the round of another chair, got his spectacles out of their case and on his nose, and prepared to be comfortable. He never knew when his paper slid to the floor, and his bald head was bobbing over his empty hands. Mrs. Marinda Peters was upstairs sorting rags

to give the rag-man when next he came by, the only way she could earn a little money for her own use, and the daughter was away; so Joel Pepper walked in without any one's knowing it. He had knocked and knocked at the kitchen door until his knuckles were sore, and tired of waiting, concluded to walk in by himself; for go home he would not, with Mr. Peters' cent in his pocket. So he marched in and stood by the old man's chair.

"Here's your cent," he said, holding it out in his hot fingers. His empty pail struck suddenly on the edge of the chair with a clang, the noise, more than the words, waking the old man up.

"Hey? What d'ye want?" cried Mr. Peters, his eyes flying open suddenly.

"Your cent," said Joel, holding it out.

"A cent? I hain't any money to give ye," snarled old Mr. Peters, now fully aroused, "And d'ye git out of this house soon's ye can, or I'll give ye suthin' to git for." His spectacles slipped to the end of his nose as he started to get out of the chair.

"I don't want any cent," said Joel, hotly, sticking the one between his finger and thumb

up under the old man's nose. "Here, take it Don't you see it? It's yours."

"Mine? My cent?" repeated the old man, staring at it. "What d'ye mean? I hain't give ye no cent."

"I found it in the road. You dropped it," said Joel, feeling tired to death. And dropping it hastily on the window-ledge he hurried off, swinging his tin pail violently.

"What's the matter?" asked Mrs. Peters, at the sound of the voices; and, leaving the rag-bag suddenly, she hurried over the stairs. Old Mr. Peters, hearing her coming, picked up the cent, and, not stopping to put it in the old leather pocket-book, slipped it into his vest pocket, and seizing the newspaper, fell to reading.

"Joel," called Mrs. Peters, as Joel was running out of the untidy yard, "what is it? Come here and tell me."

"Let th' boy alone, can't ye, Marindy?" screamed Mr. Peters, irritably; "beats all how you allers interfere in my business — just like a woman!" he fumed, as Joel came back slowly.

But Mrs. Peters was as persistent in her way as her husband, and she soon had the whole

"'HEY, WHAT D'YE WANT?' CRIED MR. PETERS"

story laid bare. When that was done, she took Joel into the buttery and gave him a big wedge of custard pie. "You better go t'other way, and not past the keepin' room window," she said, "and eat it."

Joel, with enthusiasm considerably abated as he examined his pie in the shadow of the big seringa bushes, concluded he didn't want it very much. But feeling very hungry, which was his usual condition, he finished it to the last crumb. "There warn't any sugar in, for one thing," he said critically. "I wonder why folks can bake pies who don't know how, and Mamsie never can have any."

"That boy found your cent in th' road, and brought it clear way up here," cried Mrs. Marindy, on a high key, going into the keeping room, where the old man sat absorbed in his paper.

"S'pose he did?" grunted old Mr. Peters.

"I sh'd think you'd 'a' give it to him, Pa. It's a shame. Such a hot day as 'tis, too."

"I don't have no cents to throw away," snarled old Mr. Peters. "And I wish you'd let me read my paper in peace and quiet."

"Well, I sh'd think anybody who'd got a

heart in their bosom 'ud feel sorry for them five little Pepperses. I don't s'pose they see a cent to spend from one year's end to another." And she made up her mind to bake a whole custard pie, sometime, and smuggle it down to Mrs. Pepper.

"Though how I'll manage," she lamented, "would puzzle the Dutch and Tom Walker. But I'll try, just the same."

Meanwhile, Joel, though he made light of the cent business, was relating his visit to the Peters' homestead, and the presentation of the piece of pie.

"'Twas most horrid old pie," he said, with a wry face.

"Oh, Joey," said Mrs. Pepper, "when Mrs. Peters tried to be kind to you. You ate it, didn't you?" and she laughed with the others when he said yes.

"But 'twas horrid," cried Joe. "I can't help it, Mamsie. There wasn't any sugar in it, and it was black and smutty and thin. Why don't we ever have any pie in the little brown house, Mamsie?" he asked suddenly.

"Why don't little boys talk sensibly?" asked Mrs. Pepper. "It's a great deal to have the

little brown house, anyway, Joel, I sh'd think you'd know that."

"Mamsie," said Polly, hearing this, "s'posin' we didn't have the little brown house; just s'posin', Mammy," and her cheek turned quite white.

"I know it, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, quickly, setting busy stitches on Davie's jacket, where she was rapidly sewing a patch, "that's the way to talk. Just supposing we hadn't any little brown house."

"But we have got it, Mamsie," said Joel, throwing himself flat on the floor, to indulge in a long and restful roll.

"Well, we may not always have it. If folks don't appreciate their blessings, sometimes they fly away."

"How's the little brown house going to fly away, Mamsie?" demanded Joel, sitting quite straight.

"Well, it may," said Mrs. Pepper, with a wise little nod. "Mercies often take to themselves wings. Come, Polly, you may pick out these basting threads; that patch is done, thank fortune!"

Joel hopped to his feet, and ran swiftly out,

craning his neck to see the tip of the chimney on the little house, and surveying it critically on all sides.

"It isn't going to fly — it isn't," he declared, quite relieved. Polly humming away some merry nonsense to Mamsie, neither of them heard him. So he came close to their chairs and repeated it: "Say, the little brown house can't fly away — there ain't any wings."

"You take care you don't say anything discontented about not having pie and other things," said Mother Pepper with a smile, looking off from her work for a minute to let her eyes rest on his face, "and I guess the wings won't grow, Joey."

"Anyway, I'm glad I don't live at old man Peterses house," said Joel, going back to his resting-place on the floor, and waving his feet in the air.

"Mamsie, do you suppose old Mr. Peters ever was a little boy?" asked Davie, thoughtfully.

"Dear me, yes," said Mrs. Pepper, abstractedly, as she was lost in thought over the question, Could she get the patch on Joel's little trousers before dark?

"A real boy?" persisted David.

"Yes, of course," answered Mother Pepper, moving her chair to get a little more of the waning light. "But I don't know what kind of a boy," she added.

"I don't think he was a very nice boy, Mamsie," declared David. "Not a real, very splendid one."

"Huh!" cried Joel, in a tone of contempt. "I guess he wasn't, Dave Pepper! I wouldn't have played with him at all," he added, in great disgust.

"Wouldn't you, Joel?" cried little David, running over to sit down by him on the floor, and observing great care to keep clear of the waving legs.

"No, indeed, sir," declared Joel. "I wouldn't have played once with him, not if he'd lent me his knife. An' his skates and —"

"Oh, Joel, not even if he'd lent you his skates?" cried David, incredulously.

"No, sir-ree! Nor if he'd let me have his horse to drive as much as I wanted to," declared Joel, most positively, with another wave of his legs.

Little David collapsed on the floor by his side, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, as he lay and thought it over.

"I'd 'a' said, 'Go right away, you bad old Peters boy,'" cried Joel, delighted at impressing David so completely, "'or I'll take a stick to you.'"

"And then you'd be very much like old Mr. Peters yourself, Joel," said Polly, catching the last words.

XVI

THE STAGE-COACH RIDE

"CHILDREN," said Mrs. Pepper, and how her eyes shone! "I've got something very nice to tell you — that is, for Joel and David. Your turn will come sometime, Polly," and Mother Pepper smiled encouragingly at her.

"Polly's turn never comes," said Ben, gloomily, who felt dreadfully fretted to think he couldn't earn money enough to do something nice for her. "We eat it all up as fast as we get paid," he had once said to his mother.

"And that's what we have mouths for," she had answered brightly. It never would do for Ben to get discouraged, so she kept all the little ache in her heart out of sight. Now she beamed at Ben.

"Oh, Polly's time's coming," she said; "never fear, Ben."

Ben looked ashamed when he heard Mamsie's hopeful words, and brightened up at once.

"Thank you, Ben," she said, going up to his chair to lay her hand on his shoulder. "Mother doesn't know what she'd do if her big boy failed her. Well now, children, I must hurry and tell you the good news about Joel and David. Mr. Tisbett has invited them to go on the stage to-morrow to Strawberry Hill."

Once a week Mr. Tisbett ran the stage down to Strawberry Hill, returning by the East District. It was quite the prettiest ride out of Badgertown, following now and then the course of Cherry brook, and past fertile fields and forests, by a winding, rambling thoroughfare. And when once the settlement of Strawberry Hill was reached, there were Green's Tavern and the stop for dinner!

Joel and David greeted this announcement with howls of delight. Phronsie caught the spirit and danced around the old kitchen in a clean pink calico dress, and cheeks to match.

"Oh, Phronsie, I don't believe you know what you're dancing for," cried Ben with a laugh, and seizing her as the bustle died down a bit.

"Yes, I do, Bensie," said Phronsie, struggling to get down to dance again.

"Well, what is it then?"

"Joel and Davie said 'O-oh' and 'Goody'!" hummed Phronsie, beginning to dance harder than ever.

"I thought so," laughed Ben.

"Don't tease her," begged Polly, coming up.

"Polly, I wish you were going too," said Ben, suddenly, who couldn't help saying it.

"Dear me, I couldn't go and leave all the work, Ben," exclaimed Polly, "even if Mr. Tisbett had asked me."

"Well, I wish you could go, all the same," sighed Ben.

Polly shook her head, and clapped her hands at Phronsie, and tried to forget what Ben had said. But it stayed there, deep in her heart, nevertheless.

Joel and David could hardly sleep that night for thinking of the splendid treat of the morrow. Oh, if it should rain! They trembled as they rolled over on their backs and listened for any chance pattering on the roof.

"It doesn't rain a single drop," declared Joel, rolling over on his side again, and carrying most of the bedclothes with him.

"But it may, Joel," said little Davie, fearfully.

"No, it isn't going to," said Joel, confidently.

"Mamsie said we were to be good boys," said David, after a pause, in which Joel was lost in the wildest imaginings of sometime driving Mr. Tisbett's black horses. "Don't you know she did, Joey?" twitching his arm.

"Well, I'm going to be good. I'm always good," said Joel, jerking away his arm.

"Oh, Joel," cried little Davie, involuntarily.

"Well, I'm going to be good to-morrow, anyway," declared Joel. "You'll see, Dave; as good as pie."

"Because Mamsie said she'd trust us," continued David, "and we'd make trouble for Mr. Tisbett unless we minded him."

Joel didn't reply, trying to decide whether he should hold the reins both together in one hand or use two, Mr. Tisbett observing both methods.

"I guess I'll hold 'em in two hands," he said at last, "'cause most likely he won't let me take the whip at the same time. Ain't I glad I haven't cut the right one any more!" He held it up and squinted at it as well as he could for the darkness. There wasn't even a scar to be seen, thanks to Mother Pepper's good care.

"Boys — boys, go to sleep," called Polly's voice over the stairs. "They're so excited," she said, going back to her mother, "about to-morrow. Mamsie, isn't it good that they're going?" she cried, with shining eyes.

Mrs. Pepper looked at her keenly. "Yes, 'tis, Polly," she answered simply.

What a time they had getting the boys ready for their unwonted journey! Joel rebelled at the thorough scrubbing that Polly insisted on before he was inducted into his clean clothes.

"We wash all the time. Mamsie makes us," he grumbled. "Ow, Polly, you're rubbing my ear off."

"That's only every day," said Polly, who dearly loved to fix up with extra preparations on important occasions. "And this — why, Joel Pepper, you've never been away on a journey before. Just think, you're going on a stage-coach clear over to Strawberry Hill!"

"I know it," said Joel, trying to appear as if it were an everyday affair, while little David turned pale with excitement.

"Well, now then, I believe you're nice and clean," said Polly, standing off and viewing Joel, red and shiny from her efforts. "All except

this other ear must be washed a little bit more."

"Oh, Polly," cried Joel, viewing her soapy cloth in alarm, "you've done it enough. Mamsie," he howled, "Polly's a-washing me just dreadful." But Mother Pepper did not seem to hear, so Polly finished, and then began on Joel's hair.

This was so much worse an undertaking, that the whole household were very glad indeed when it was over.

"I hope no one will ask you again to go anywhere, Joel," said Ben. "Goodness me, Polly, I sh'd think you'd be all tired out getting him ready!"

"Well, he's done now," said Polly, pushing back the damp rings of hair from her own brow, while she pulled Joel's jacket straight with the other hand. "Now, Joe, if you go and sit down and don't move, you'll be all nice when Mr. Tisbett comes; and I'll take Davie."

To little David the whole task of washing and combing his hair, and arranging him in his neatly mended best clothes, was one long, tremulous delight. He wouldn't have had it omitted for the world. At last he was patted and brushed,

and pronounced "just perfect," Polly sealing her approval by a kiss that she meant for his forehead, but it fell on the tip of his nose instead.

"You didn't kiss me," said Joel, in an injured voice.

"Well, you didn't stand still long enough," retorted Ben, answering for Polly. "Goodness me, Joel, I'd as soon dress an eel as you!"

"G'lang there! *Whoa!*" And the stage-coach rattled up in fine shape.

"Mr. Tisbett's come! Mr. Tisbett's come!" roared Joel, as if everybody couldn't see and hear the stage-driver's hearty tones, to say nothing about the stamping of the horses and the rumble of the wheels. And darting out, he flew over the grass. "Let me sit up there with you, Mr. Tisbett," he screamed, trying to get up on the wheel.

"Sho, there! So you may. Give us your hand, Joe, my boy," said Mr. Tisbett, brimming over with good humor, and a warm feeling at heart at making the Peppers so happy, and he put out his brawny hand, gave a jerk, and in a minute there was Joel smiling and shouting and waving his hat to David and the others escorting him down to the roadside.

"Remember what I told you, Joel," said Mother Pepper, fixing her black eyes on him.

"Yes'm," said Joel, nodding his head, "I'll remember, Mammy. I'm going to sit next to Mr. Tisbett," he cried, seeing the preparations to lift Davie up to a seat on the box.

"Joel," warned his mother.

"I'm a-goin' to have you up top here, along of me," said Mr. Tisbett, "so's I can look out for you. And I'm a-goin' to tell where you'll set, too, Joel. Now, you just hist over there, and let Davie in betweenst us; he's littler. There you be," as Joel promptly obeyed and took the outside seat.

"Good-by, Mammy," shrilled little David, stretching forward to look past Mr. Tisbett's burly figure, and longing for another kiss.

"Good-by, Davie."

"Good-by. Good-by, Joel."

"Crack — snap!" went Mr. Tisbett's whip. Off pranced the two black horses, and round went the wheels. He never made such a fine start in his life, Mr. Tisbett decided, when suddenly, "Stop! oh, stop!" screamed Joel, and the stage-driver, looking around at him, saw his face convulsed with the effort not to

"'CRACK-SNAP!' WENT MR. TISBETT'S WHIP"

cry, as he yelled again, flinging out his hands frantically, "Stop!"

"Whoa!" cried Mr. Tisbett to the prancing black horses, so suddenly they nearly sat back on their haunches. "What's the matter of ye, for the land's sakes o' Goshen?"

"I want to get down," cried Joel, with a frantic lunge. "Let me get down!"

"Hold on there, or you'll break your neck," roared Mr. Tisbett. "What you want to get down for?" and he scratched his head, his habit when in perplexity.

"I want to kiss my Mamsie," stammered Joel, and now the tears began to come.

"Sho!" cried Mr. Tisbett, "so you shall. There. Now then!" Joel, in some way, was lifted up and swung clear of the wheel, when he set out for a run to the little brown house. Mrs. Pepper and Polly and Ben were standing still in the front yard and watching them, while Phronsie was making cheeses, holding out her little pink calico frock to sink slowly in a puff on the grass.

"Good-by, Mamsie," cried Joel, flinging his arms around her neck, "I'll be good. I truly will."

"I know you will, Joel," said Mrs. Pepper, drawing him close to her, while she kissed and fondled him to his heart's content. Then he rushed back again. Mr. Tisbett leaned down and gave him his brawny hand once more, and up he flew. "Crack! snap!" went the whip — off pranced the horses — round went the wheels — and away they all went!

Joel hung to the railing of the seat against which he leaned, with a blissful feeling that he was rushing through the air, and he saw nothing but those black horses below him. As for little Davie, he didn't dare to breathe, but peered out from his place between Mr. Tisbett's long, square figure and Joel, seeing nothing, only conscious that everything was perfectly beautiful.

Mr. Tisbett slackened up after about a mile of this sort of driving. He always liked to give a good impression in going through the town. Folks invariably rushed to the windows, and said, "The stage is going by," and they never seemed to be tired of such amusement. So Mr. Tisbett always gratified them to the fullest extent. To-day, as he hadn't many passengers till he came to the Four Corners, he let the horses

go at their utmost speed, occasionally glancing at the rapt faces of the Pepper boys, when he would roll his quid from one cheek to the other, and smile in great satisfaction.

"Easy there, now," he said to the black horses, holding them up a bit. "Well now, that's something like, eh, Joel?" And he leaned over to see Joel's face.

Joel was slow in finding his tongue. At last he answered, "Yes, sir," but continued to stare at the horses.

"I guess this ere boy likes it, if you don't," exclaimed Mr. Tisbett, somewhat disappointed at Joel's lack of appreciation, and peering down at Davie. "Eh, David?"

"I think it's just like Heaven," said little David, with a long-drawn sigh of bliss.

"That's a fact," cried Mr. Tisbett, well pleased. "And so you liked it?"

"I loved it, Mr. Tisbett," declared David, solemnly.

"And you've said it about right," declared Mr. Tisbett, the smile dropping away from his jolly face, but the satisfaction remaining. "And I love them two horses's if they was folks. Fact!" And Mr. Tisbett slapped the

toe of his big boot with his whip. "Now Jerry's a trifle the smartest, and — "

"No! No!" howled Joe, in protest, and leaning clear over David so abruptly that the stage-driver started and involuntarily pulled up his horses smartly. "I like Bill the best."

"Hey — sho, now!" exclaimed Mr. Tisbett, relaxing his tight grip on the reins. "You've waked up, have ye? Well, you set back and hang on to that there railing, or you'll break your neck. Then what would your Ma say to me? and I shouldn't never take you again."

"Mr. Tisbett," said little Davie, deliberately, "I like Jerry the best, too. I do."

"No, you don't," screamed Joel, with a nudge in Davie's side, "Bill's the best. Say so, Dave."

"I can't," said little David, quite decidedly, "'cause I think just as Mr. Tisbett does."

"They're both good; good as gold," Mr. Tisbett here made haste to say. "An' sometimes I think one's better'n t'other, an' then again I don't know. So, boys, the only way to fix it up straight is to like 'em both best. Well, we're comin' to my first passenger," and the stage-driver chirked up the horses. "Now step

lively there." And presently the turn of the road brought them to a white house with green blinds and a big piazza across one end.

There was a tall woman walking up and down in front of the house, and by the roadside a great collection of boxes, and a huge carpet bag, two baskets, and a bird-cage.

"Beats all how women act," exclaimed Mr. Tisbett, in vexation. "Why can't she set in th' house and wait for me? I ain't never been late. Now I s'pose she'll take my head off."

David glanced up in terror at Mr. Tisbett's shaggy head under the big straw hat, and then at the tall woman who was to take it off. "Joel," he whispered, "we mustn't let her." But Joel had no ears for anything that Davie might say, but was occupied in seeing the stage-driver flourish up to meet the passenger.

"Good mornin', Miss Beaseley," said Mr. Tisbett, in his pleasantest way, springing over the wheel the moment the horses stopped.

"I've been a-waitin' here," said Mrs. Beaseley, tartly, "the longest time. I thought you never'd come."

"'Twould 'a' been a sight easier to 'a' waited in th' house," observed Mr. Tisbett, composedly,

proceeding to pack the array of boxes and bags in the coach, "bein's I warn't schedooled to reach here till quarter past seven. And it's just three minutes to that time now, Marm." He stopped to pull out an immense silver watch, the only thing that could draw Joel's attention from the black horses. Now he stared at it until it disappeared again in Mr. Tisbett's waistcoat pocket.

"Well, you needn't waste the time now," said Mrs. Beaseley, in asperity. "I'm sure there's little enough left. Put that carpet bag in careful, Mr. Tisbett; it's got some cups and sassers in I'm a-takin' to my daughter in Strawberry Hill."

"All right, Marm," said Mr. Tisbett, setting the carpet bag, that seemed in danger of bursting, so full was it packed, on one of the seats. "I hain't never broke any o' my passengers' belongings yet, and I'm too old to begin to-day." To which Mrs. Beaseley deigned no reply, only to say, "You put 'em all in, and I'll get in last."

So Mr. Tisbett put in the bandbox and a smaller box, and one two or three sizes larger, and the rest of the bags and the two baskets,

and a bundle. Then he picked up the bird-cage.

"You let that be!" screamed Mrs. Beaseley. "I'm a-goin' to take that in my hand; you'll scare that bird to death."

"You get in and set down, and I'll hand it in to you," said Mr. Tisbett. "I ain't a-goin' to scare your bird. I've seen 'em before, and handled 'em, too, for that matter."

"I shan't set foot in that stage till all my things is in, and packed to suit me," declared Mrs. Beaseley, positively. "You gimme the bird;" with that she seized the bird-cage, and holding it well before her, she stepped up the first step. The next minute she was precipitated on the floor of the stage, with the bird-cage under her. When she was helped up, and the bird-cage was set on the seat opposite, Mr. Tisbett slammed to the stage door quickly, and hopped nimbly to the box, leaving her straightening her bonnet. All the while she was giving vent to a torrent of abuse because the stage-coach steps were too high, the bird screaming and fluttering wildly in fright.

"Didn't I tell you she'd take my head off?" said Mr. Tisbett, with a sly wink at the boys,

and a little chuckle as he resumed the reins and they started off.

Little David drew a long breath of relief, and gazed again at the shaggy head under the old straw hat. "It isn't off, Mr. Tisbett," he said, "and I'm so glad."

"Hey?" exclaimed Mr. Tisbett, staring at him. "What's the boy mean? Oh, — my soul an' — body!" And he slapped his thigh with his brawny hand, and burst out into a hearty laugh that seemed to echo on every side, as the stage-coach spun along.

"I sh'd think you'd laugh," exclaimed Mrs. Beaseley, in withering scorn, inside the vehicle, "when I've smashed my best bonnet, and shook that bird to death — like enough he'll die — and tromped all up the front breadth to my dress." But as there was no one to hear her, and Mr. Tisbett still laughed on, seeming unable to stop himself, the stage-coach contributed a very merry spectacle to those privileged to see it, as they bowled along to the next passenger for Strawberry Hill.

"So you thought she'd really took my head off, did ye?" asked Mr. Tisbett at last, and mopping his face with his bandanna. "O dear me! Hee-hee-hee!"

"You said she was going to, Mr. Tisbett," said little David, gravely.

"So I did. I see I must be careful what I say, after this. Well, David, she'd like to 'a' took my head off, an' would, if she'd had her way."

"O dear!" exclaimed little David, greatly shocked.

"But she hain't, yer see," finished Mr. Tisbett, cheerfully, "it's on, an' set stiddy. Sho, now, easy there, Bill and Jerry! We must stop for Mr. Filbert."

The next passenger was a thin, wiry little man, who seemed to beg pardon constantly for being in somebody's way. And after Mr. Tisbett had slung his hair trunk on the rack, Mr. Filbert stepped gently into the stage-coach. "Excuse me, Marm," he said to the woman. "Did I step on your toes?"

"You hain't hurt me none," said Mrs. Beaseley, "and you hain't teched my toes. Goodness me, after the treatment I've had, an' th' sass I've took, I guess I won't complain."

The little wiry man sank into the furthest corner and pulled out from his pocket a newspaper, which he tried to read. But Mrs. Bease-

ley, beginning on the statement of what she had suffered waiting for Mr. Tisbett, and every minute since the journey was begun, Mr. Filbert never got more than ten lines down the first page.

At last, after picking up a little girl, and a boy who spent his time in thrusting out his head from the swinging vehicle to stare enviously up at Joel, the stage-coach rattled in fine fashion, bringing everybody to the doors and windows, into Strawberry Hill, and pulled up at the tavern. Here all the passengers got down; Mrs. Beaseley insisting that she ought to pay but half price, considering all things, and with very black looks, when Mr. Tisbett coolly waited till every cent was in his palm. The little thin man skipped nimbly out of the coach, and, with a backward alarmed look at her, hurried to get into a wagon waiting a little distance off, in which Mr. Tisbett deposited the hair trunk.

"Say, how'd you get up there?" asked the boy, tumbling out of the coach to stare up at Joel. The small girl, who was going to spend Sunday at her grandmother's, got out with dignity, carrying her best clothes in a bundle. She stopped a minute to hear what Joel said.

"I stepped up," said Joel; "how'd you s'pose?"

"How'd he let you?" persisted the boy, pointing with a dingy thumb to the stage-driver. "He never let me."

"'Cause he did," said Joel, curtly, "that's the reason."

"Oh!" said the boy, and Mr. Tisbett coming back, he moved off. But he still continued to watch.

"Now, says I, we'll hop down," cried Mr. Tisbett, which Joel proceeded to do in a trice, glad enough to stretch his legs. "Here, David, give us your hand." And the stage-driver soon had little David on the ground. "Now, Bill and Jerry, it's your turn." And very soon Mr. Tisbett was busy in unbuckling straps and tackling, to release the big horses, Joel in a wild delight getting dreadfully in the way, and being, as he thought, an immense help. Little David stood off and watched the proceeding, longing to help too, but too timid to say so. The other boy rushed up. "Oh, let me help!" he cried, thrusting a tousled head in between the two busy with the harness.

The stage-driver shot him a keen look. "It

will be time enough for you to help in this ere job, Jim," he said, "when I ask you." So Jim slunk off, to stare at a distance again. And at last the horses were led off to the big barn to get their dinner of oats and hay, and then Mr. Tisbett drew Joel and David away.

But this was a hard task, for Joel hung over Bill and Jerry in delight, watching every mouthful. "Can't I climb up on his back and sit there while he eats?" he begged, pointing at Bill, while even little David much preferred the old barn with its sweet odor, and the big haymows, to any other place.

"No, you can't," said Mr. Tisbett, answering Joel. "And you ain't a-goin' to be in this barn. I can't leave you here alone. Your Ma wouldn't like it. And besides, you've got to have somethin' to eat. I always get my dinner here. So come along; you're my company to-day, an' I told Mrs. Pepper not to put you up anything to eat."

Strangely enough, at the mention of dinner, Joel still clung to the hope of remaining with the horses. Seeing which, the stage-driver wasted no more words, but picked an end of his jacket in his fingers and bore him off. Once within the cosey little dining room, with the green paper

shades flapping in the summer breeze, and seated at the table with the tavern-keeper's wife bustling around to lay on the hot dishes, Joel thought differently, and had a hard time to keep his tongue still. Little Davie watched everything silently, with wide-open blue eyes.

"I'm goin' to hev ham an' eggs," said Mr. Tisbett. "Fried on both sides, Mrs. Green, an' plenty of 'em."

"All right," said the tavern-keeper's wife, with a smile for the jolly stage-driver who always made it pleasant for them all when he took his dinner there once a week. "Now, what's these boys goin' to have?"

"As good a dinner as you've got in the house, Mrs. Green," said Mr. Tisbett, heartily; "these are the little Pepperses, and they live over to Badgertown, Marm." He said this with an air much as he might have announced, "This is the Lord Mayor of London," if he had been called upon to introduce that functionary.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Green, much impressed, "I'll do my best. Well now, I've got boiled dinner an' a raspb'ry shortcake. Do you think they'd like that?" She appealed to the stage-driver.

"Yes sir-*ree!*" cried Joel, smacking his lips; "we don't have anything but potatoes and salt for our dinner. Oh, David!" he seized little Davie's arm tightly, "raspberry shortcake, she said; that's what Polly was telling about she hoped we could have sometime."

XVII

THE FIGHT AT STRAWBERRY HILL

"NOW, then," exclaimed Mr. Tisbett, when dinner was over, and the little Peppers declared they couldn't eat any more, "I'm a-goin' to set out on th' porch a minute or two. I allers let Bill an' Jerry rest a full hour," pulling out the big silver watch again.

"When I'm a man," cried Joel, leaning back in his chair, wishing he could eat some more raspberry shortcake, "I'm goin' to have a watch just like yours, Mr. Tisbett."

"I thought you were going to have horses just like Bill an' Jerry," said Mr. Tisbett, in surprise.

"Oh, I am!" cried Joel, in alarm at being misunderstood; "exactly like Bill and Jerry."

"You ain't goin' to have horses an' a watch!" cried the stage-driver, keeping very sober. "You must choose between the two."

"Then I'll take the horses," decided Joel, quickly.

"You've got two, Mr. Tisbett," observed David, quietly.

"Eh? Oh, so I have!" cried Mr. Tisbett. "Well, p'r'aps we'll let Joe have' em both, then; that is, if he's a good boy. Well, can't either on you eat any more? What a pity, an' Mrs. Green has such good things."

The tavern-keeper's wife cried out that some way her raspb'ry shortcake wasn't quite so light as what she had day before yest'day. "La, Mr. Tisbett!" she exclaimed, smoothing her apron delightedly, "if you'd only happened along then, 'twould 'a' melted in your mouth."

"This suits me to a T," said Mr. Tisbett. "Now, Joel, if you and David will play round here real pretty, an' be good boys, I'll set on th' porch an' pass th' time o' day with the folks."

The little Peppers promising they would be as good as could be, Mr. Tisbett slouched off to the big arm-chair, where he always took his accustomed rest at Strawberry Hill while the horses were put up in the barn. Joel ran back to tell Mrs. Green, "I like you, — I do; you make awful nice things," and David echoed the same, as they both scampered out of the house.

"I declare, they're as pretty-behaved children's I ever see," confided the tavern-keeper's wife to the rest of the family who were at home, the tavern-keeper himself being away for the day. "Poor things, although they were so hungry, an' they don't get much to eat at home, they didn't grab an' pick at things." And she made up her mind to put up a little bundle of her sugar cookies for them to eat on the way back.

"I wish we could have taken some of the raspberry shortcake home to Polly," mourned Davie, speaking out what had been running in his mind all through the dinner. "She's never tasted any."

"Well, we couldn't," said Joel, with a qualm of conscience because he hadn't thought of it before; "Mamsie's told us it isn't nice to speak of taking things home. Hurry up, Dave," as they raced on.

"I know it," said little Davie. But he sighed, nevertheless.

"Now where'll we go?" asked Joel, leaning breathless against the big maple on the edge of the back dooryard.

"Mr. Tisbett said we were to play round here," said little Davie.

"Of course," assented Joel, in a superior way "Well, let's peek in th' barn the first thing."

"Oh, Joe, we mustn't go in!" exclaimed little David, holding him back. "Mr. Tisbett said we weren't to be in the barn."

"I know it," said Joel, twitching away. "I said peek, Dave. Mr. Tisbett didn't say not to do that." So both boys got as far as they could on the threshold of the big sweet-smelling barn, without stepping over the sill, and craned their necks to get a sight of the two black horses.

"I can't see 'em! O dear me!" cried Joel, grumpily. "I wish there was a window we could climb up to."

"We can hear 'em eating," said little David, taking great satisfaction in that.

"Hoh — what's that! I want to see 'em," Joel ran on discontentedly. "O dear me! Mr. Tisbett wouldn't care if we just stepped in up to that post."

"Yes, he would," cried Davie, in alarm lest Joel should really step over.

"Let me alone," cried Joel, crossly. "O dear me! I can't see a bit of 'em." And in a minute, without stopping to think, he hopped over the door-sill and jumped into the barn.

Little David stood still in terror.

"Come here, Dave," called Joel, in glee, being careful not to go beyond the big post, "you can see 'em just as good's can be. Bill's got his mouth full of hay, an' he's bobbing his head, and the wisps are tickling Jerry, an' he don't like it," and Joel laughed heartily.

Suddenly somebody slapped David on the back, precipitating him over the sill, and "Jim" ran in past him. "Helloa. What are you doin'?" he asked Joel.

Joel looked at him, but didn't answer.

"I live here," said Jim, "over in Strawberry Hill. An' Mrs. Green's my a'nt; and I've just come home from my grandmother's."

Joel said nothing as to this family history, but continued to gaze at the horses. David picked himself up from the barn floor, and hurrying out over the sill, began to dust his clothes, glad that Joel had not seen him tumble in.

"I knocked him over," snickered Jim. "Hee-hee! Cry-baby!" and he pointed to little David, whose face was quite red as he tried to brush his best clothes clean again.

"I'm not crying," said Davie, indignantly, and raising his hot face.

"You knocked him over!" cried Joel, boiling with wrath, and, deserting the big post, he squared off toward the Strawberry Hill boy, and doubled up his little brown fists. "Then you've got to fight me."

"All right," said Jim, glad he was so much bigger. "I know a place down in th' cow-pasture where I can lick you's easy's not."

"You ain't a-goin' to lick me," cried Joel, sturdily, "I'm goin' to lick you," while little David, sick with terror, screamed out that he wasn't hurt; that he didn't care if Jim did push him over, and for Joel to come back — come back!

But Joel and Jim were already halfway to the cow-pasture, and Davie, wild with fright, stumbled over across the barnyard, and off to the house to find Mr. Tisbett.

"He's just gone into th' house," said one of the farmers who always took this hour, on the occasion of the stage-driver's weekly visit, to come to the tavern porch and get the news. "He'll be out in a minute or two. Sit down, sonny; you're dreadful hot."

But David wrung his hands, and rushed into the tavern. The dining room was dark and cool, all the dinner things being carried out,

except the pickle dish and the sugar bowl; and the crumbs swept off from the table, and the green blinds pulled to. He could hear the rattle of the dish-washing and the clearing-up generally out in the kitchen, and he plunged in. "Where—where's Mr. Tisbett?" he cried, his breath most gone, from fright, and his little face aflame.

"Goodness me, how you scart me!" exclaimed the tavern-keeper's wife, who, with another woman, was flying around to get the work done up. "Oh, it's one of the Pepper boys. What's the matter, dear?" with a glance at David's hot face. "What you ben a-runnin' so for?"

"Joel." It was all David could say, as he pointed off where he thought the cow-pasture was.

"Somethin's happened to that other boy. Didn't you say his name was — Joel?" said the other woman, fastening very small but sharp eyes on David.

"Mercy me! you don't think it!" exclaimed the tavern-keeper's wife, her ruddy face taking a scared expression. "Dear me! I must call Mr. Tisbett. Mr. Tisbett!" she screamed, running, if the speed she now exercised could

be called by that name, for it was more like waddling, out to the porch.

"He isn't there," gasped David, following her. "Oh, dear Mrs. Green, please hurry and find him," he implored.

"I don't know no more'n the dead where he is, child," said Mrs. Green, turning a perplexed face to David, after the old farmer had said the same thing over again. "Mr. Tisbett's got the run o' the place, an' likely as not, he's stepped to one o' the neighbors," pointing to a small cluster of houses a quarter of a mile away.

Little David groaned and clasped his small hands in distress.

"Then nothing can stop their fighting?" he exclaimed in despair.

"Fighting? Who's fighting?" demanded Mrs. Green, sharply.

"Joel and Jim," said David, glad to think he'd remembered what Mr. Tisbett called the boy, yet sorry, as it flashed over him, that the tavern-keeper's wife was his "a'nt." "He pushed me down," and his face turned more scarlet yet. But it was necessary to tell the dreadful thing, else Mrs. Green would think Joel was to blame in beginning the fight.

But the tavern-keeper's wife had her own reasons for believing differently. And without wasting her breath on words, except to ask David, "Where?" she flung her dish-towel, which she had been carrying in her hand, across her arm, and picking up her skirts, she made remarkably good time across the barn-yard by a shorter cut, which she was familiar with, to the cow-pasture.

Jim saw her coming first, and much as he disliked on ordinary occasions to see his "a'nt," he now hailed her approach with secret delight, for the Badgertown boy was giving him all he could do to protect himself. So he now shouted out, "My a'nt's comin'. Stop!"

"I don't care," cried Joel, pommelling away. So Jim struck back as well as he could, longing to hear Mrs. Green scream out, "Stop!" which she did as soon as she had breath enough, and shaking her dish-towel at them. "You wait there, Jim," she commanded, on top of her call, as she came panting on; and Jim, looking all ways for escape, saw there was no use in attempting it. When she did reach him, she seized him and shook him till his head seemed to wobble on his shoulders. Then, with a re-

sounding box on the ear, that seemed like a clap of thunder, she paused to take breath.

"Oh," begged little David, "don't hurt him, dear Mrs. Green."

"Why did you stop us?" glowered Joel, wrathfully, turning his bloody little nose up in scorn. "I could 'a' done that to him's easy as not, if you'd let me."

Mrs. Green stamped her ample shoe on the ground. "You start for home," she said to Jim, "an' tell your Pa if he lets you show your face over here for a long spell, he'll settle with me."

Jim took one dive across the cow-pasture, scaled the fence, and disappeared.

"Now you come along of me," said Mrs. Green. "Goodness land alive! I'm all shook to pieces," and she started for the tavern. "I'll wash your face," to Joel; "then I guess you ain't hurt much," yet she regarded him anxiously.

"I ain't hurt a bit," declared Joel, stoutly, and wiping off the blood with the back of one chubby hand. "And I could 'a' licked him's easy as nothin'," he added regretfully.

"I wish I'd let you, before I took him in tow,"

said the tavern-keeper's wife, hastily, getting over the ground as well as she could.

"Mamsie wouldn't have liked it," cried little Davie, running on unsteady feet by Joel's side, and looking at him sadly. "Oh, no, she wouldn't, dear Mrs. Green."

"I don't s'pose she would now," said Mrs. Green. "Well, Jim's a bad boy, if I am his a'nt. Like enough he'll git a trouncing from his father," she added cheerfully, as some compensation.

"What is a trouncing?" asked Joel, suddenly, as they hurried on.

"The land alive, don't know what a trouncing is!" ejaculated the tavern-keeper's wife. "It's a whipping, and Jim's father knows how to give it good, I tell you."

Joel stood still. Little David stared in horror in Mrs. Green's face.

"I don't want him to be whipped," said Joel, slowly. It was one thing to fight it out with fists in the cow-pasture, but quite another to go home to be whipped by a father.

"Oh, yes, he will," repeated Mrs. Green, in her cheeriest way, and shaking her head at him. "You needn't fear, Joel, he'll catch it when he gets home."

"But I don't want him to," declared Joel, loudly, not moving. "He mustn't! Stop his father from whipping him! He shan't." And before Mrs. Green could recover from her astonishment, he plunged her deeper yet, by bursting into tears.

She gazed from him to David, still shaking her head helplessly. "Well, if I ever!" she exclaimed, when she came out of it.

"And I shall just run and tell his father not to," blubbered Joel, realizing if Jim was to be saved from that awful whipping, he must be the one to do it. "Where does he live?" he cried, emerging from his tears at the chance of action.

"Over there," answered the tavern-keeper's wife. "Well, if I ever!" pointing to a yellow house. She kept ejaculating this over and over, as she pursued her way to the house, thoughtfully swinging her dish-towel.

Joel, with David at his heels, ran off across the cow-pasture, tumbled over the fence, and followed the direction that Jim had taken and that Mrs. Green had pointed, leading to the dingy yellow house.

Long before they reached it, they could hear

squeals that were not pleasant to hear, and that made them quicken their pace, to run around the house-place, and plunge almost into the face of an untidy woman who hurried to the door.

"What d'ye want?" she demanded, as the two boys stopped panting before her.

"Jim," gasped Joel.

"And his father," added little David, breathlessly.

"They're both out there," said the woman, pointing with the hand holding the dish-towel, to the dilapidated woodshed. "He's gittin' a lickin', and Pa's a-givin' it."

The squeals were now so much worse that Joel gave a plunge that carried him to the woodshed door, and little David, his heart in his mouth at thought of Jim's father, followed as best he could. Joel dashed in. "Oh, do stop!" he screamed.

Jim's father turned; he had a big stick in his hand. When little David saw it he shuddered and sat down helplessly on the woodshed floor, in among all the clutter and dirt. Jim, with his knuckles twisted into his streaming eyes, whirled around from under the big hand grasping his

collar. When he saw Joel, he screamed worse than ever. "Don't let him kill me, Pa," he roared, huddling up to him.

Joel sprang up to a tall, big-shouldered man with a bearded face. "Oh, sir," he cried, "please don't whip Jim any more — p'r'aps he didn't mean to push David over, I don't b'lieve. Don't whip him." He put out his little brown hand, and boldly seized the stick.

"Hey?" roared the big man. "Well, I'm beat all to smithereens," and his hand holding the stick dropped to his side. Jim stopped from sheer amazement, the roar dying in his throat.

"If you'll only let him go," said Joel, "I'd be much obliged, sir," remembering how Mamsie said he should be polite when asking a favor.

The big man grinned all over his bearded face. "I don't see but what I've got to, you ask me so pretty," he said, showing nearly every tooth in his head. "Well, Jim, you're let off for this time. I hadn't only just begun," he added to Joel, as he hung up the stick on a beam.

Jim bounded off, climbed a tree, and watched to see the boys go away.

"'OH, SIR,' HE CRIED, 'PLEASE DON'T WHIP JIM ANY MORE'"

"What's your name?" asked his father, as Joel helped David to his feet, and they started off.

"Joel Pepper," he answered, "and this is my brother David. Say how do you do, Dave," he whispered, pulling his sleeve. But little Davie was too far gone in distress to speak, only to smile faintly. "And we live over in Badgertown in a little brown house," continued Joel, feeling that he ought to make up for David's silence.

"Oh!" said Jim's father.

"And we must go now," said Joel, keeping hold of David's jacket, "'cause you see Mr. Tisbett may be wanting us" — very desirous of getting away.

"Did ye come with Mr. Tisbett?" asked the big man.

"Yes, we did," said Joel. "Come on, Dave. We must go, sir. Good-by." And pulling David along, he ran at a smart pace off toward the tavern.

Mr. Tisbett was standing on the porch, just starting for them, when the two boys ran up. And in front of him was the tavern-keeper's wife, telling the whole story as far as she knew

it, the old farmer hitching forward his chair to catch every word. When the stage-driver saw them, he hemmed loudly, and made a sign for Mrs. Green to stop.

"Well, now, I s'pose," he drawled, "it's about time to hitch up them horses. Want to come and help, Joe and David?"

Joel gave a skip of delight and released Davie's jacket. "Oh, whickety — yes!" he cried. Little David did not answer, but smiled his pleasure, and the tavern-keeper's wife went into the house to get her bundle of cookies ready.

But just as they got to the barn Joel hung back suddenly. "I ain't goin' in," he said. Mr. Tisbett didn't hear him, but marched on. Little David stopped in perplexity.

"No, I can't," said Joel, growing very sober, "'cause I was naughty and went in. Mr. Tisbett doesn't know it. O dear me!"

"You can tell him," suggested David, thoughtfully.

"O dear, dear!" exclaimed Joel, just ready to cry, as he could hear Mr. Tisbett lift down the harness, and call out, "Stand still, there, Bill — good Jerry."

"Why, boys!" exclaimed the stage-driver suddenly, coming to the door, the harness in his hand. "What on earth's the matter? I thought ye was jest crazy to come in, Joel," he added reproachfully.

Then Joel burst right out. "I've been naughty — and went in." And he flung himself across the threshold, shaking with disappointment at losing the best chance of the whole day.

Mr. Tisbett looked at Davie for explanation. So David, telling it as well as he could, got through with the story finally.

"I can't say that ye warn't naughty, Joel," said the stage-driver, slowly, "'cause ye were. But I'm a-goin' to let ye in, and besides, I need ye to help me with them horses," and Mr. Tisbett began to look very worried at once.

Joel sat very straight. "Oh, I'll help you, Mr. Tisbett," he cried joyfully. And in a minute they were all three in the big stall, and Joel was in the very midst of things, and even David forgot his fright enough to lend a helping hand, and to feel his importance, and presently the big black horses were led out of the barn, and harnessed into the stage-coach.

"Now, hop up!" cried Mr. Tisbett, when he had gone carefully around and around the big coach, to see that every strap and buckle was in place, and had got down on his knees to be quite sure the springs were all right. Then he gave David a lift up to the box, Joel clambering up on the other side. "We'll drive up to th' door," he said, "an' get th' passenger," for there was one woman going over to Badgertown.

"Oh, let me drive!" begged Joel; "just up to the door, Mr. Tisbett," he implored.

"We don't want to be upset under folks' noses," said Mr. Tisbett. "Land! I'd rather 'twould happen where there warn't no one to see, if 'twas going to."

"I wouldn't upset it for anything," promised Joel. "Please, Mr. Tisbett."

But Mr. Tisbett sat down and gathered up the reins and drove round with such a flourish that it never had been surpassed, it seemed to the people on the tavern porch. And the one woman got in with her basket, and the tavern-keeper's wife ran down the steps and stood on her tiptoes and handed up to Joel the bundle of cookies, begging them to come again. And the

old farmer said "Good day," and the woman with little sharp eyes, who had been washing the dishes, hurried out, pulling down her sleeves, to see them off. And away they rattled, with faces turned toward home and Mamsie.

They had proceeded about a quarter of a mile, when Mr. Tisbett suddenly asked, "Want to drive, Joel? Come along over here," and he reached past David and took his hand. "Now, then, I'm goin' to set in the middle a little spell," and before Joel could recover from his astonishment, he found the old leather reins in his brown hands. He was driving Mr. Tisbett's black horses!

XVIII

IN THE LITTLE BROWN HOUSE

THE delights of that day at Strawberry Hill never died out of remembrance, as Joel and David went over it constantly, so that the whole Pepper family soon felt that they had been of the company in the stage-coach along with Mr. Tisbett. Only when once the story was told of the trouble with Jim, as it was by David, Mrs. Pepper decided that that should never be referred to again. But her black eyes glowed when little David proudly related how Joel had stopped the beating that Jim's father was giving him, although the account was much delayed, Davie was in such a tremble.

But the dinner! The two boys couldn't tell enough times to suit themselves or their audience, about that wonderful meal.

"How did it taste?" asked Polly, as Joel finished the description of Mrs. Green's raspberry shortcake, and smacked his lips over it.

"Just like all the best things you ever tasted in your life, Polly Pepper," he answered. "And the juice ran out all over it, and there was sugar on top."

"Oh, Joel," cried Polly, incredulously, "not sugar on top, and inside too!" and she paused to think how such a fine shortcake could taste.

"Yes, there was," said Joel; "lots and lots of sugar, Polly Pepper, was all sprinkled on top. Wasn't it, Dave?"

"Yes," said little Davie, and his mouth watered as he thought of it.

"And sugar inside — was it sweet?" persisted Polly, still standing quite still.

"As sweet as anything," declared Joel, positively, and bobbing his stubby black head. "You can't think what a shortcake that was, Polly, if you try ever so hard."

"Mamsie," cried Polly, suddenly, "do you suppose we'll ever have one? Do you?"

"Maybe," said Mrs. Pepper, not looking into the brown eyes, but keeping her own bent on her work; "but I wouldn't think of it, Polly, if I were you. Things don't happen if you sit down and fold your hands and watch for 'em."

"Well, I don't b'lieve it will ever happen that

we do get a shortcake, any more than we had a chicken pie," said Polly, turning away with a sigh.

"Why, you had your chicken pie, Polly," cried Joel, "only 'twas a goose."

"Old gray goose!" said Polly, scornfully. "It was trimmed with a posy, though, and that was nice, wasn't it, Mammy?" brightening up.

"Yes, indeed," cried Mrs. Pepper, cheerily; "and you baked it so good, Polly."

"So it was baked good," said Polly, all her good humor returning. "And it did not make so much matter, did it, Mamsie, that he was tough?"

"No, indeed," said Mrs. Pepper, laughing; "he lasted all the longer, you know, Polly."

"Mean old gray goose!" exclaimed Joel, at the remembrance; "he most broke my teeth, trying to eat him."

"Do you remember, Joe, how you teased for the drumstick?" laughed Polly. "You soon put it down on your plate, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Joel, bobbing his head, "I remember, Polly. I couldn't bite a single thing off. Mean old goose!"

"He looked nice," said little Davie, thought-

fully, "he was so brown, and there were Polly's flowers on top of him."

"Yes," said Polly, "those were nice, children. Well, p'r'aps we'll get a really and truly chicken pie sometime. And if the old stove would behave, and not have these dreadful holes coming all the time, where the putty tumbles out, it would be perfectly splendid. Now," cried Polly, running up to the stove, and shaking her brown head at it, "you've got to do your very best. If you don't, I'm sure I shall just give up!"

"Will you cry, Polly?" asked Phronsie, creeping up behind her.

"Yes, maybe," said Polly, recklessly. "Yes, I really think I shall have to cry, Phronsie, if that old stove lets the putty Ben put in last week tumble out again."

"Then it mustn't, Polly," said Phronsie, very decidedly, "let the — What is it Ben put in?"

"The putty, child," said Polly.

"It mustn't let the putty tumble out," said Phronsie. Then she ran up to the stove, and laid her little face up against its cold, black surface, for on summer afternoons there was never

any fire in it. "You mustn't be naughty, old stove," she said, "for then Polly will cry."

"Oh, Phronsie!" cried Polly, "you've smutted your face, and blacked up your nice clean dress," and she pulled her back in dismay.

"O dear!" whimpered Phronsie, in distress, as she looked down at the long black streak across her pink calico gown. "I didn't mean to, Polly; truly, I didn't."

"Never mind," said Mrs. Pepper, looking across the kitchen; "Mother'll wash it out for you by and by. Put on another one, Polly."

"Let me wash it, Mammy," begged Polly, carrying Phronsie off to wash her face and get her into another gown.

"No, you'll only spread it more, for you don't know how, Polly," answered Mother Pepper. So Polly, feeling as if there were a great many things she must grow up and learn, hurried off with Phronsie into the bedroom.

And then it was that Joel suddenly thought of the circus he meant to have whenever the time came ready. "Come on out to the woodpile, Dave," he said, "and let's talk it over."

It was a good two hours after when Joel and David clambered down from the woodpile, and ran into the house.

"Joel," said Mother Pepper, "you forgot to fill up the wood box; see, it's nearly empty."

"It's always empty," Joel began, his head nearly bursting with big plans for his circus.

"Joel," said Mrs. Pepper, sternly, "don't let me ever hear you fret at your work again. Go straight out and bring in the kindlings."

"And I'm going to help, too," cried David, skipping after. So it wasn't very long before the two boys had brought in two good baskets-ful of kindlings, which just filled the wood box behind the stove.

"I'm glad it's done," remarked Joel, with great satisfaction, knocking off the little splinters sticking to his fingers.

"People always are glad when their work is finished," said Mrs. Pepper, breaking off a fresh needleful of thread.

"Shall you be glad, Mamsie?" suddenly asked Joel, who never could get over the idea that it was a perfect delight to his mother to sit and sew.

"Of course she will," cried Polly, unguardedly. "Mamsie's tired to death sewing and working all the time."

Little David's face grew very long, and he

turned away, hoping no one would see him cry. Joel burst into a loud fit of sobbing.

"I think — it's — too — too bad," he blubbered, covering his face with his arm, "that Mamsie has — has — to sew and work — all the time."

"Now you see, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, putting aside her work and drawing Joel on her lap, "what mischief a few words can do. There, there, Joel, don't cry," and she patted his black hair. "Mother's glad to work for her children, and she gets rested when they're good." But Joel sobbed on, and she had to repeat it many times before he would wipe his tears, and be comforted. Little Davie drew near silently, to hear what she said.

Phronsie, in the bedroom, saw Joel in Mamsie's lap, and Davie hanging over her chair, and she pattered across the kitchen floor. "Take me, too, do Mamsie," holding out her arms.

"So Mamsie will," cried Mrs. Pepper, heartily, and drawing her up to sit next to Joel, on her lap. When little Davie saw that, "I wish there was room," he said softly, "to hold me, too, Mamsie."

"Well, there is," said Mother Pepper, open-

ing her arms, "and for Polly, too," for she saw Polly's head drooping from her reproof.

"Oh, Mamsie!" cried Polly, running over to her, to get within the good arms, though she couldn't sit on her lap, of course, as there were three little Peppers there already; "I'm sorry I spoke, but I didn't think."

"Didn't think makes most all of the trouble in this world," said Mrs. Pepper, gravely; "so see to it that next time you don't have to make that excuse, Polly child," and she dropped a kiss on Polly's red cheek.

"It's just this way, children," she went on, smiling on all the bunch; "Mother is really glad to work, and every stitch she puts in, she keeps thinking, now that's for Ben and Polly and Joel and David and Phronsie." Mother Pepper's black eyes went lovingly around on all the faces so near her own. "And I keep looking ahead, too, to the time when the little brown house people are going out into the world and —"

"Oh, we aren't ever going out into the world, Mammy," declared Polly, in alarm. "We are going to stay in the little brown house forever'n ever."

"Forever'n ever," echoed Phronsie, folding her hands tightly together; while the two boys vociferously protested that nothing should ever drive them out of the little brown house. "No, not even to live over in Strawberry Hill with nice Mrs. Green."

"Well, anyway, we must all live and grow up so that the little brown house won't be ashamed of us," said Mrs. Pepper, "and that's what Mother is working for; so don't let me hear any more crying about it. Now remember, all of you." With that she opened her arms wide again. "Now scamper off," she said, with a bright smile, and she picked up her sewing and sent her needle cheerily in and out once more.

That evening, after the supper things were all cleared away, Joel began by drawing Davie off in a corner to whisper mysteriously. "Let him alone, Polly," said Ben, in a low voice. "Joe'll tell of his own accord, pretty soon."

And sure enough, it wasn't ten minutes. Mother Pepper had gone into the bedroom to tuck Phronsie away for the night, when Joel said triumphantly, "We know something, Dave and me, and we won't tell what 'tis."

"All right," said Ben, coolly. "Polly, I

guess I'll mend Mamsie's washboard. I shan't have another chance so good this week."

"I wish you would, Bensie," said Polly, well pleased, for Polly dearly loved everything kept mended up, and "shipshape," as Mrs. Pepper used to say. "I'll spread the paper down so you don't get any mess on the floor." So she ran to the pile of old weekly newspapers her mother always saved, when any of the Badgertown people sent her a copy, as they did once in a while, and flapping one open, she soon had a "paper carpet," as she said merrily, on the floor. And Ben, coming out from the woodshed, with the washboard in his hand, together with the hammer and nails, the kitchen began to hum with the noise.

"Yes," said Joel, loudly, "we do; we know something real fine, Dave and I. Don't we, Dave?" with a nip on Davie's little arm.

"Ow!" said Davie.

"That so?" assented Ben, coolly.

"Yes, and we aren't goin' to tell, either," said Joel, "not a single word; so there, Ben!" Then he began to whisper as fast as he could to David.

"You'll tell, yourself, Joe, without anybody's

asking," said Ben, as Joel began again with: "It's perfectly splendid, Ben Pepper. And oh, Polly, you don't know what we do; does she, Dave?"

"Polly and I will know pretty soon," added Ben.

"No, you won't, either," contradicted Joel. "We aren't ever in all this world goin' to tell of the circus I'm goin' to—"

"There!" shouted Ben, throwing down the hammer. "You've told it, Joe, just the same as I knew you would. Ha, ha!"

"Don't, Ben," begged Polly, "it teases Joel. Well, we don't know what kind of a circus you are going to have, Joey," she said kindly, "so we'll be just as much surprised when we see it."

"Will you?" cried Joel; "well, then, Polly, I'd rather tell the whole, if you'll be surprised when you see all the animals."

"I guess you will," said Ben, in a low voice; "there's no danger in promising that."

"I truly will, Joey," promised Polly. "Do be still, Ben."

"Well, to begin with, Polly, there's going to be a rhodo— What's that you told us about in your story of the circus?"

"Hoh, hoh!" laughed Ben, busily at work over the washboard, "there's your rhododendron, Polly. I thought Joel wouldn't forget to have one in his circus."

"Go on, Joel," said Polly, with a cold shoulder for Ben. "Now I know your circus is going to be perfectly elegant," she cried enthusiastically, running over to their corner. "Do tell us about it, Joel."

Joel, vastly complimented that Polly took such an interest in his plan, now began lustily to set it forth, and little Davie piped in whenever there was a chance for a word, which wasn't often. And finally Ben said, "I guess I'll move my washboard and the 'paper carpet' up there with you all," and Polly said, "Oh, do, Ben."

And presently they were all so very jolly, Ben deciding not to say anything more of Polly's rhododendron, that none of them knew when Mother Pepper said above their heads, "I thought you didn't know 'twas five minutes past your bedtime, Joel and David," pointing to the clock.

XIX

CIRCUS PLANS

JOEL practised the part of so many animals in the next week that the little brown house people became quite accustomed to any strange grunting or roaring they might chance to hear, as if a whole menagerie were let loose. Only Mamsie forbade that such noise should be allowed within doors. And every once in a while Joel would rush into the kitchen, with "Polly, how does an elephant scream?" and "Tell me, Polly, does a kangaroo cry this way?" until Polly was quite worn out.

"I guess you'll be glad when that circus of Joe's is over with," said Ben. "I pity you, Polly. I'd enough sight rather chop wood for Mr. Blodgett."

"Well, you needn't," cried Polly, "pity me, Ben, for Joel's so very happy. And poor Mr. Blodgett! O dear, it's too bad his barn's all burnt up."

"And the horse and the cow," said Ben, very soberly.

"Hush!" warned Polly, looking around to see if Phronsie heard. Luckily, she was in the bedroom, sitting down by the lower bureau drawer, which was open, and trying on her red-topped shoes, getting every button into the wrong button-hole. "Oh, Ben," Polly rushed up to whisper in his ear, "I do think that was too dreadful for anything."

"Yes," said Ben; "it was Mrs. Blodgett sent you word she was sorry she hadn't any milk to send to Phronsie now and then."

"Good Mrs. Blodgett!" exclaimed Polly, with the tears in her brown eyes. "Oh, I do wish we had something to send her!" she sighed.

And Ben sighed too. Because, as he had been working at Deacon Blodgett's pretty steadily the last few weeks since the fire, he had noticed how the neighbors and friends had been sending in things to show how sorry they were for the Blodgett family, and it grieved him dreadfully that the Peppers seemed to be about the only ones left out. So now he preserved a gloomy silence.

"Well, come, dear me," cried Polly, when she

saw this, and, remembering her mother's advice, to think first before she spoke the words that might work mischief, she brightened up. "P'r'aps some chance will come to us to show dear Mrs Blodgett that we are sorry for 'em, if we can't send 'em things."

"P'r'aps," said Ben. But he still looked gloomy. "I can do my work just as well's I know how," he thought; "but I'm going to do that, anyway, so I don't see what other chance there'll be."

"Whom are you going to invite to see your circus, Joel?" asked Polly, a few nights later, when, as usual, after supper, Joel was haranguing loudly on the great show to take place, and even little David was wound up to such a pitch of enthusiasm that Mrs. Pepper, on seeing his red cheeks, felt a dozen times inclined to send him to bed ahead of the time. But his happy little face appealed to her strongly, and she argued to herself, "I don't know but what 'twould hurt him quite as much to disappoint him, as to let him sit up half an hour longer. Thank fortune, it's seven o'clock now!" So David was saved being sent off to bed, until it was time for Joel to go too.

"I ain't a-goin' to invite any one," said Joel; "no, sir-*ree!* Everybody's got to pay to come into my show."

"How much do we pay?" asked Polly. "O dear me, Joe, I don't b'lieve you'll get many people to see it."

"Pins, I s'pose," said Ben.

"Yes," said Joel, "pins, an' good ones, too, not crooked, bent old things."

"Pins cost money," said Mrs. Pepper, looking up from her work-basket. "I suppose you know that, Joel?"

"Well, we can't let folks in without paying," said Joel, in deep anxiety. "'Twouldn't be a circus if we did."

"I tell you," said Polly, seeing his forehead all puckered up in wrinkles; "why don't you have some tickets, Joel, made out of paper, you know, and marked on 'em for ten cents and five cents?"

"Where'd you get the paper, Polly?" asked Ben, who was very practical. "Better not propose anything you can't carry out. Look at Joe's face," he whispered, under cover of the shouts from the two boys.

"O dear me!" cried Polly, whispering back,

"we never have anything! It's perfectly dreadful, Ben; and we must help Joe. And you know yourself there aren't any pins hardly in the house, and Mamsie couldn't give us one of those."

"You must think of something else besides paper, for that's just as bad as pins," said Ben, with perfect faith that Polly would contrive a good way out of the difficulty.

Polly put her head into her two hands, while Joel was vociferating, "Oh, tickets! Goody! Polly's going to make 'em! Polly's going to make 'em!" in a way to fill her with dismay, while she racked her brains to think what would satisfy Joel as entrance money to his circus.

"Now, children," she said briskly, lifting her head, her hands falling to her lap, "Ben says we can't manage the tickets very well, because we haven't any paper." She hurried on, "Be still, Joe!" as she saw signs of a howl. "But I'll tell you something else you might have, Joel, and we've got plenty of 'em, and they're round, and oh, so nice!" By this time her voice had such a confident ring, and she laughed so gayly, that little Davie cried out, "I know it's nice, Polly," and even Joel looked enthusiastic.

"It's just as nice," declared Polly, clasping her hands. "Oh, you can't think! And I'll help you gather some."

"What is it?" screamed Joel; "do tell, Polly."

"It's cheeses," said Polly; "don't you know, Joe, out in the yard?" They were the little, round, green things, so called by the children, that grew on a little plant in the grass, and they used to pick and eat them.

"Oh, they're not money," said Joel, falling back, horribly disappointed.

"Neither are tickets money," said Polly, airily; "they only mean money; and the cheeses can mean it just as well. Besides, they're round."

"And I think the cheeses are a great deal better than anything, to pay with," said Ben, coming to Polly's rescue. "And you can charge as much as you want to, you know, Joe, 'cause they're plenty."

"So I can," cried Joel, quite delighted at this. "Well, you must pay fifty, no, seventy-five cheeses to get in, Ben."

"Oh, I guess I shall spend my time picking seventy-five cheeses!" cried Ben; "you must let me in cheaper'n that, Joel."

"You may come in for ten, then," said Joel,

coming down with a long jump, very much alarmed lest Ben should not be able to get in. And as for having the circus without him — why, that would be dreadful!

"You do think up such perfectly beautiful things, Polly," cried David, huddling up close to her, and lifting his flushed cheeks.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Polly, catching sight of them, "your face is awful red." And she caught Mother Pepper's eye.

"I know it," said Mrs. Pepper, the troubled look coming back. She laid down her work. "Come here, David, and let Mother see you."

So Davie got up from the ring on the floor, and ran over to his mother, and climbed in her lap. "I don't see what 'tis," she said, looking him over keenly. Then she made him open his mouth, and she got a spoon and looked down his throat. "It isn't red," she declared, "and I don't believe it's sore."

"No," said little Davie, "it isn't sore, Mammy. Mayn't I go back, now?" he asked, looking longingly over at the group on the floor.

"I know what's the matter with Dave," said Ben, wisely. "He's been so many animals this week, Joel's made him, that he's tired to death."

"I think you're right, Ben," said Mrs. Pepper. "Well now, Davie, Mother is sorry to send you to bed before the time — it's ten minutes yet to half-past seven; but she thinks it best."

"Do you, Mamsie?" said Davie.

"Yes, I do," said Mrs. Pepper, firmly. "I really think it's best. You're all tired out, and to-morrow I guess you'll wake up as bright as a cricket."

"Then I'll go if you want me to," said David, with a sigh, and sliding out of her lap he went slowly out and up to the loft.

"I haven't got to go for ten minutes," sang Joel after him. "Goody, ain't I glad!"

"It's too bad Davie had to go," mourned Polly; "but I suppose it's best."

"Yes," said Ben, "he'd be sick if he didn't. It's most too bad he has to go alone, though," and his blue eyes rested on Joel's face.

Joel began to squirm uncomfortably.

"Don't you think 'twould be nice, Joe," said Polly, "for you to go with Davie? He's so much littler; it's too forlorn for him to go up to bed alone."

"No, I don't," snapped Joel. "I'm going to stay down and talk over my circus. You may

get in for ten cheeses, too, Polly," he said magnificently.

"Thank you," said Polly, coldly.

Joel gave her a queer look. "And I'm going to let Sally Brown in for ten. No, she's got plenty of cheeses in her yard, she's got to pay more," he rattled on. Polly and Ben said nothing.

"I'll go if you want me to, Polly," at last Joel sniffed out.

"I don't want you to," said Polly, still with a cold little manner, "unless you want to go yourself, Joel. But I should think you would want to, when you think of poor little Davie going up there alone. You know you don't like to do it, and you're such a big boy."

Joel struggled to his feet. "I'll go, Polly," he shouted. Mamsie flashed him a smile as he dashed past and stumbled up the steps of the loft.

But the next morning David didn't seem to be bright and wide awake as a cricket, and although there was nothing the matter with him, except he still had his red cheeks and complained when any one asked him if he felt sick, that he was tired, that that was all, Mother

Pepper kept him in bed. And that night he came down to sleep in Mamsie's big bed, and Polly had a little shake-down on the floor.

"I wish I could ever be sick!" said Joel, when he saw the preparations for the night.

"Oh, Joel, don't wish such perfectly dreadful things," said Polly.

"Well, I never sleep with Mamsie," said Joel, in an injured tone. "And Davie gets all the good times."

"Now, Joel," said Mrs. Pepper, the morning after that, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but you can't have your circus awhile yet, till Davie gets real strong. So you must rest your animals," she said with a smile, "and they'll be all the better when the right time comes."

Joel, swallowing his disappointment as best he could, went out and sat on the back steps to think about it. He sat so very still, that Polly ran out after a while to look at him. "Oh, Joe, you aren't crying!" she said in dismay.

"No," said Joe, lifting his head; "but, Polly, I'm afraid my animals will all run away if I don't have the circus pretty soon. Don't you s'pose Mamsie'll let me have it in the bedroom? Dave could sit up in the bed and see it."

"Dear me, no," cried Polly. "The very idea!" Whenever Polly said, "The very idea!" the children knew it was perfectly useless to urge anything. So now Joel sank back on the doorstep and resigned himself to despair.

"I tell you what I'd do if I were you, Joey," said Polly, kindly, and running down to sit beside him. "I'd think up all sorts of different things, and get all ready, every speck. There's really a great deal to do. And then I'd pick cheeses all the spare time I had. Oh, I'd pick lots and lots!" Polly swept out her arms as if enclosing untold numbers. "And —"

"What do I want to pick cheeses for?" asked Joel, interrupting. "The folks that pay has to pick 'em, I sh'd think."

"I know it," said Polly; "but if you pick a good many cheeses, you can give away some tickets, you know — comple — comple — well, I don't just know what they call 'em. But they let folks in without paying."

"And that's just what I don't want to do," cried Joe, in high dudgeon. "Hoh, Polly Pepper, I sh'd think you'd know better'n that!"

"It's just this way, Joel," said Polly, trying

to explain. "Folks that give a show always send some tickets to their friends, so they don't have to pay. I should think you'd want to; why, just think," she jumped off from the step and stood before him in great excitement, "I never thought of it before," and the color rose high on her cheek. "You can ask dear Mrs. Beebe, and Mr. Beebe, and —"

"I won't have Ab'm," cried Joel; but he was very much impressed, Polly could see, by her plan.

"No, of course not," said Polly. "Ab'm has gone back West."

"And Mrs. Beebe says she ain't ever going to have him again at her house," added Joel.

"Well, never mind; and you can ask Mrs. Blodgett. She was so good to send Phronsie milk; and she's had her barn burnt."

"Well, Sally Brown'll have to pay," said Joel, as Mrs. Pepper called Polly to come in to her work. And he jumped off the step and began to pick cheeses with all his might.

XX

CIRCUS OR MENAGERIE?

"YOU tell Joel," said Mrs. Beebe, standing in the doorway of the little shop, "that I've got some animals I'm goin' to send down to his circus this afternoon, if so be I can't come myself and bring 'em."

"Yes'm," said Polly; "and oh, thank you, dear Mrs. Beebe."

"Whatever can they be?" she cried to herself, racing home on the wings of the wind. "Dear me, won't Joe have the most splendid time! and dear little Davie, it's good he's rested and well," and Polly's mind was flying as busily as her feet, as she set all her wits to work to think up everything that could possibly be achieved to help out the great event.

When she got home Joel was in a great tribulation. "Polly, Polly," he mourned, "the tiger's run away."

"Yes, she has," declared Davie, mournfully,

'and she was the best of the whole. Oh, Polly!" and he sat down on the step in despair.

"Now that's too bad!" cried Polly; "but then, dear me, Joe, p'r'aps we can find her. Doesn't Sally know where she is?"

"No — no," cried Joel, quite gone in distress, and twisting his chubby fingers to keep from crying; "and Mrs. Brown doesn't know either. She says that cat never ran away before in all her life, and I'd just got her tamed to carry Seraphina. O dear, dear!"

"Joel," cried Polly, "I do believe that cat is up in a tree, maybe, near the Browns'. I just mean to run over and call her with all my might."

"We've called and called, and every one of the Browns has called," said Joel, "and she won't come."

David's head sank, and he covered his face with both hands, unable to say a word.

"Well now, Joel," said Polly, "I wouldn't care, if I were you; and oh," she cried suddenly, with delight at the comfort she could give him, "Mrs. Beebe says she's going to send you some animals, if she can't come and bring 'em herself. Think of that, Joe!"

"Oh — oh!" screamed Joel, in an ecstasy. "Now I don't care if that old cat has run away. She bit me awfully yesterday," and he held up his thumb; "and she's a mean old thing, and she wasn't a very good tiger, anyway."

"Mrs. Beebe's animals will be a good deal nicer," said little Davie, bringing up a shining face as his hands fell away. "What kinds are they, Polly?"

"I don't know," said Polly; "that's all she told me."

"And we've got the monkey left, 'cause I'm going to be the monkey," said Joel, with a bob of his black head; "and Dave's going to be a kangaroo, only he don't jump as big as he ought to."

"I jump as high as I can, Polly," said little David, getting off from his step to go to her side, and look up into her face anxiously.

"Oh, I know you'll be a lovely kangaroo, Davie," said Polly, giving him a reassuring little hug, "and they don't always jump high, Joel."

"Don't they?" asked Joel, in surprise.

"No, indeed, not unless they want to," said Polly. "But why don't you be the kangaroo

then, Joe, and let Davie be something else? Give him the snake, then he won't have to jump, and it's easier to wriggle."

"Oh, no — no — no," cried Joel, in alarm, "I'm going to be the snake myself, and slash around like everything. Dave can't be the snake."

"Well, something else that's as easy as the snake, then," said Polly, laughing. "You mustn't tire him all out, Joel, for then Mamsie will have to stop the circus, and *that* would be perfectly dreadful, you know."

This made Joel decide at once that he would change his animals round a bit; so he said, "I'll be the kangaroo myself, Dave. See here," and he executed such a remarkable series of leaps and hops, and long and short steps, that his audience of two were quite overcome with admiration.

"Oh, I am so glad, Joel, that you'll be the kangaroo," said Davie, with a long breath of relief, "for it tired me so to try, and I couldn't do him good."

"No," said Joel, coming up bright and shining, as he finished his last hop, "you couldn't, Davie. Now you must take some of the others

then, if you aren't to be the kangaroo." And he threw himself on the grass at Polly's feet, as she and David now sat on the step.

"Only one," said Polly; "you mustn't give him but one, Joe, to take the place of the kangaroo."

"Well, the kangaroo was a big one," said Joel; "he ought to take two others to make up."

"No, only one," said Polly, decidedly.

"I'd rather be a bird," said little Davie, timidly.

"Pshaw! a bird!" exclaimed Joel, in high disdain. "I'm not going to have any old birds. Folks don't have 'em in a circus."

"Well, this is going to have a menag — menag—" said Polly, who sometimes found it hard to manage all the big words she wanted to use. "Anyway, what Ben called it the other night. He heard 'em talking of it at the Blodgetts'."

"I know," said Joel, steering clear of the word. "Do they have birds in that thing that Ben told about?" he asked doubtfully.

"Oh, yes — beautiful ones — trained to do anything, Joel Pepper," cried Polly. "Oh,

your show wouldn't be anything without a bird!"

"Then I'll have one, and Dave shall be it," decided Joel, veering around.

"And I'll do things," cried little Davie, very much excited, and getting off from his step to hop along the path. "I'll sing."

"That's nothing!" said Joel, in scorn.

"And I'll hop and pick up crumbs," added David, anxious to please and do everything that a well-brought-up bird should do.

"Hoh! that won't be anything!" exclaimed Joel, with a withering look.

"I'll tell you, Joel, let's play that you trained Davie, who's a bird, you know, to drag Seraphina around. We can tie her on a board real nicely."

"Oh, yes, that's prime!" cried Joel, seeing hope ahead for David's bird, if Polly only took hold of it.

"And then you can tell the audience that the trained bird is going to ride on the monkey's back," cried Polly.

"Oh, hooray!" shouted Joel, prancing off to hop with David down the path and over the grass.

"And then when you've got through showing him off, David must sing a little song to show he is a bird. This way," and Polly threw back her head and twittered twee-dee-ed, and chee-chee-ed, and trilled in a way she had, till the boys looked up in the branches of the old scraggy apple tree to see if there really was any little bird there.

"That's fine!" cried Joel, clapping his hands and drawing a long breath.

"Oh, I never can do it so nice as Polly," said David, in despair, growing quite sober.

"Polly," cried Joel, suddenly, "couldn't you stay behind the bushes and sing? and folks will think it's Dave, — the bird — I mean."

"Why, yes, Joel, if Davie doesn't want to sing," said Polly; "but he's the bird, you know, so it must be as he wants."

"But he can't sing good, you know," said Joel, impatiently.

"I'd rather you'd sing the bird, Polly," said little David, "'cause I can't do it good like you; and I'll *be* the bird." And he repressed the sigh he felt like giving.

"Then I will, gladly," said Polly, who loved dearly to sing.

"And, Polly, will you play the band?" cried Joel, who had been so busy getting his various animals planned for and ready, that the music was left out of the reckoning.

"Dear me, Joe!" exclaimed Polly, in consternation. Yet she felt quite flattered. "We haven't any table out here, except the stone one," glancing at it, "and my fingers won't make any noise on that. So I don't see how we can have the band." Polly always made her fingers fly up and down on the kitchen table while she sang, pretending it was a piano and she was a great musician, for it was the dearest wish of her heart to learn to play on a piano.

"Ben can get us a board, I know," cried Joel, confidently; so he ran off to find him in the woodshed, for Ben was home to-day, chopping wood. And pretty soon Joel came running back, proclaiming that Ben had said yes, if Polly would play, that the board should be all ready.

"O dear me!" cried Polly. "Well, then, I must hurry and go in and practise," as she called drumming on the kitchen table; she said this with quite an important air, as she hurried into the house.

"Ben's going to be the elephant, isn't he, Joel?" she asked, turning around in the doorway, for Joel changed his animals about so often it was difficult to keep track of them.

"No," said Joel, "I'm going to be that."

"Why, I thought you were to be the bear," said Polly, in surprise.

"I am, and Mr. Tisbett's black horses, and—"

"You can't be two horses, Joe," said Polly. "Dear me. Ben must be one of them."

"Well, I'm going to be Bill, anyway," said Joel, in alarm. "Ben can be Jerry. And I'm going to be Mr. Tisbett and make 'em go."

"You can't be Mr. Tisbett if you're Bill," said Polly, in distress. "Oh, Joel, some one else must be stage-driver."

"This isn't stage-driver," corrected Joel, in a superior way. "Hoh! don't you know anything, Polly Pepper! It's circus! And the horses do things. I saw 'em in the big picture."

"Well, then, I can be Mr. Tisbett," said Polly, tingling to her finger-tips at the prospect.

"Mr. Tisbett isn't a girl," said Joel, in scorn.

"But I can put on Ben's coat, and you can

tell 'em I'm Mr. Tisbett, same's you introduce all the animals," persuasively said Polly, feeling as if nothing could be quite as nice as to be Mr. Tisbett and manage those black horses.

"Yes, let Polly be Mr. Tisbett," begged little David, longing to be that personage himself. "She'll make the circus splendid."

"All right," said Joel. "Well, I'm going to jump through the paper hoops, anyway, on Ben's back. Are they safe?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, indeed," said Polly, who had a terrible time in making them, Joel being the most critical of individuals, "as safe as can be, in the bedroom cupboard;" and she ran off to get them, but not so fast as Joel, who rushed eagerly past her.

"Take care, Joe, you mustn't get 'em," warned Polly, dashing into the bedroom at his heels. But too late! Joel's hands were on the paper rings, and he clutched them so tightly that, lo and behold, one little brown fist went clear through one of them, to come out on the other side!

"Now, see," began Polly, desperately. Joel gave one look, then burst into a flood of tears.

"I've spoiled it! I've spoiled it! Oh, I can't jump through it now!" he wailed, still holding them closely. "Oh, Polly, I've spoiled —"

"Well, it's your own fault!" Polly was just going to say, knowing that she would have to make a new one, and where should she get the paper! Then her brow cleared, and she gave a sunny smile. "Never mind, Joey!" she cried. "There, p'r'aps it isn't much hurt," and she took the broken one, and began to smooth it out.

"But it's bursted," cried Joel, trying to look through the rain of tears. "Oh, Polly! I was going to make the hole when I jumped through."

"Um! —" said Polly, busily considering. Then she sat down and rested her elbows on her knees, first setting up the poor bursted ring against the bureau; and, with her chin in her hands, looked at it steadily. "I tell you, Joel, what we'll do," at last she cried; "those edges where it is torn can be pasted together, and —"

"But it'll be a hole!" shouted Joel, who had stopped crying while Polly was thinking, knowing that she would get over the trouble some way. Now he cried worse than ever. "There

wasn't goin' to be any hole, till I made one. O dear me!" and he flung himself flat on the floor, to cry as if his heart would break.

"Joe, Joe," cried Polly, running over to him to shake his arm, "you must stop crying this very minute. If you don't, I shall not do anything for your circus. I won't be one of the animals, nor I won't play any music, nor anything."

Joel gave a great gasp. "I'll stop," he promised.

"Well, now, you must stop at once," said Polly, firmly, seeing the advantage she had gained. "So sit up, Joe, that's a good boy," as he very unwillingly brought himself up. "Now, then, I'll tell you what I'm going to do," and Polly seized the poor ring, and, tossing back her brown hair, began to pat and to pull the crooked edges together.

"You see, Joey, I'm going to put a little border of red paper all around it," she said, patting and pulling away, "then it'll be—"

"Oh, now that's goin' to be better than the other one," declared Joel, in huge delight, his round face wreathed in smiles. "And I'm going to break and smash the other one," and

he doubled up his brown fist and dashed toward it.

"No, you won't, Joe," cried Polly, in alarm. "I've only red paper enough to go on the broken one, so if anything happens to the other one, deary me! I don't know whatever in the world we could do. Now run and get the cup of paste in the woodshed, and in the shake of a lobster's whisker I'll have it all done," sang Polly, gayly.

"Lobsters don't have whiskers," said Joel, as he ran for the paste cup. "Cats do, Polly, but lobsters don't," as he brought it back.

"Oh, yes, they do," contradicted Polly; "those long thin things that stick out under their eyes. But never mind, anyway, and don't talk about them, for I've got to put all my mind on this dreadful ring."

"Polly, I wish I'd had a lobster in my circus," said Joel, after a minute's panic, in which Polly pinched and snipped and pasted and trimmed with red paper all around the hole, till any one looking on would have said this was going to be the most splendid circus ring in the whole world.

"Dear me, if you haven't enough animals

and reptiles and things in your circus, Joey Pepper!" exclaimed Polly. "You wouldn't have had room for the lobster, anyway."

"But I wish I had him," repeated Joel, stolidly.

"And you must leave something for next time," said Polly, taking up the big ring to whirl it around over her head, to watch the effect of the red strip.

"Oh, Polly!" screamed Joel, his black eyes sparkling with delight, "that's perfectly splendid! and I'll come right smash through that red ring. Yes, sir-*ree!*" and he danced around the bedroom, bumping into every object, as he was stretching his neck to look at the ring Polly was whirling so merrily.

"Well, now that's done," said Polly, with a sigh of relief; "and I'm thankful, Joey Pepper. Yes, it does look nice, doesn't it?" and she surveyed the red border with pride. "Wasn't it good that Mamsie gave me those strips of paper? Whatever should we have done without them! Well, now, says I, you've got to hurry to get all ready. Three o'clock comes pretty soon after dinner, and there's ever and ever so much yet to do before you can have your circus, Joey Pepper."

XXI

JOEL'S CIRCUS

"JOEL," cried little David, his cheeks aflame, "Mrs. Beebe has brought your animals. Come out to th' wagon." With that David's heels twinkled down the narrow path to the gate.

Joel dropped the wooden box that was to be the tiger's den, if Deacon Brown's cat should come back, and ran on the wings of the wind to the big green wagon standing out in the road. His black eyes roved anxiously over all the various things with which good Mrs. Beebe had loaded the vehicle, as she had many errands on her mind, and his heart beat fast at the sight of two or three boxes that stuck up above the rest, and an old canvas bag on top of them.

"Here, Joel," said Mrs. Beebe, her face beaming with satisfaction. "You climb up behind and fetch down that bag."

Joel's black eyes stuck out with delight,

and he hopped over the back wheel in a twinkling and laid his hand on the old canvas bag.

"Not that one," said Mrs. Beebe. "Mercy me, them's Pa's oats he told me to bring home — the other bag, Joel."

"I don't see any other," said Joel, staring around at the various things, while his hand fell off from the canvas bag. He had been almost sure he heard something stir within it.

"Dear me, child," exclaimed Mrs. Beebe, grasping the old leather reins in one hand, while she leaned back over the seat, "there they be," pointing to a paper bag laid nicely in between the two boxes, so it couldn't fall out.

"Oh!" exclaimed Joel, swallowing hard. Then he wasn't to get one of those big wooden boxes, after all.

"Yes, an' I guess you'll like 'em." Mrs. Beebe nodded and winked at him, and smiled all over her round face. "Now you take 'em and git out, that's a good boy, an' be quick, 'cause I've got some more arrants to do, an' I'm a-goin' to try to come to your show, Joel, seein' you've invited me so pretty." And with another bob of her big bonnet she twitched the reins smartly, and the old horse fell into a jog-trot,

while Joel did as he was bidden, and with his paper bag in his hand, sat down on the grass, trying very hard not to cry.

"She *said* animals," muttered Joel, swallowing something that seemed to stick in his throat.

"Look in and see," whispered little David, with a very distressed face, and sitting down on the grass to put one arm around Joel.

Joel clutched his bag and stared gloomily. It didn't matter what it held; Mrs. Beebe had said "animals," and to find that she hadn't spoken the truth, made him feel so dreadfully that he longed to scream out after her, and tell her he didn't like her any more. He wouldn't ever like anybody who told a lie; and Mamsie wouldn't ever let him go to see her, and Polly's brown eyes would fill with scorn. Oh, he could feel just exactly how Polly would look, and he shivered.

"Don't cry, Joe," said little Davie, feeling the thrill, and hugging him tightly; "and do see what's in it."

Joel gave one plunge at the bag, untwisted it, and thrust in his hand. Suddenly he started back, nearly upsetting David. "Oh!"

"What is it?" cried Davie, fearfully; "a snake, Joel?"

"No — that is, I guess so," answered Joel, dragging out a whole handful of sugar cooky animals, and spinning them on the grass in various directions. "I guess there's a snake there. She *said* animals, and they *are* animals, Dave," and a smile broke all over his chubby face.

David took one look at the sugar cooky animals flying over his head. "Oh, Joe, and they've got currant eyes!" he screamed, and clapped his hands. "See, there's a el'phant! Oh, and a goose, and a monkey!" with a dive at the last.

"That isn't a monkey!" retorted Joel, with a pause in the work of emptying the bag to investigate the animal in David's hand, "that's a wild-cat."

"Oh, Joel, is it?" cried Davie.

"Um!" Suddenly Joel took it out of David's little palm, and popped one end of it into his mouth. "Oh, goody!" was all he said. "Have some, Dave?" and he shook the bag with the rest of its contents at him. But David was sprawling over the grass, picking up the scattered ones. Suddenly he stopped, with one

halfway to his mouth. "Don't you s'pose Mrs. Beebe wants you to keep 'em for the circus, and give the folks some of them?"

Joel squirmed uncomfortably, taking large bites of the biggest animals he could pick out, but said nothing.

David laid his pig down on the grass, and looked at it wistfully.

"They're mine," said Joel, crossly, and speaking as distinctly as he could for his mouthful, and bolting a rabbit and a hippopotamus together; "an' I'm goin' to eat 'em now."

David still gazed at his pig, but didn't offer to touch it. Suddenly Joel threw down the bag. "I'm sorry I et 'em," he said ruefully.

"You've got ever so many left," said Davie, cheerfully.

"An' we'll pick up those on the grass," said Joel, suiting the action to the word, "an' save the rest for th' folks." And he soon had the remainder safe in the bag, when both the boys rushed into the house to display Mrs. Beebe's gift.

After this, it was all commotion; so much so that Mrs. Pepper said she didn't know as she should ever let another circus come into the

"'OH, GOODY!' WAS ALL HE SAID. 'HAVE SOME, DAVE?'"

orchard. But her black eyes twinkled, and she patted Joel's head when she said it, and the anxious look ran away from Joel's face; and then the dinner of potatoes and brown bread was soon finished, and Polly somehow or other got the dishes all washed up, and the kitchen as clean as a new pin, ever so much quicker than on other days, and pretty soon Joel and all his animals and the musician were out in the orchard in a perfectly dreadful state of hurry and confusion.

But at last the show was in full progress; on the seats of honor were Mother Pepper and Mrs. Beebe, who got in at the last minute, just before they were to begin. And Grandma Bascom, who was delighted to be able to hear for once, as she now could, all the roars of the various animals, while Sally Brown and the Henderson boys made up the rest of the audience. And everybody clapped their hands, and said, "Oh, isn't that good!" and, "I think that is fine!" And Grandma said, "La me!" and lifted her black mitts, which she had put on to do honor to the occasion, "and who would have thought it!" And Sally Brown and the Henderson boys stared with envy, and wished they were

some of the animals and having such a good time. And Peletiah solemnly determined within himself to get up a circus the very next week. And the excited animals thrilled with delight when it came the monkey's time to perform and jump through the big paper rings.

Joel bobbed out from behind the bushes, and told the audience what was coming; then he bobbed in again, and Polly and Ben got him into the monkey skin, — an old brown flannel petticoat that Grandma Bascom had given the children to play with, "'Cause it's so et up with moths, 'tain't fit to set a needle into to fix up," as she said. And Ben made a long, flapping tail out of an old, frayed rope, and Polly had sewed a little tuft of hair, that came out of Mamsie's cushion, on top of the monkey's head, pulling it all around the face for some whiskers; so, when Joel was really inside of it, he was perfectly awful. Particularly as he showed all his teeth, and rolled and blinked his black eyes every minute, so that Phronsie, who sat on the grass at Mamsie's feet, when she wasn't an animal and needed to perform, shivered, and clung close to Mrs. Pepper.

"Take me, Mamsie," she begged.

"'Tisn't a real, true, live monkey," cried Polly, rushing out from behind the bushes as she heard her, "it's only Joel, Phronsie."

"It's me," cried Joel, who had been making faces at Peletiah, but stopping the minute he heard Phronsie. "It's me, Phronsie."

"I want a monkey," said Phronsie, bringing her face out from under her mother's arm, "but not Joey. Please don't let Joey be a monkey," and she patted Mrs. Pepper's cheek.

"Hush, dear," said Mother Pepper, "you'll spoil Joel's circus if you talk. See, Phronsie, the monkey's going to jump through the rings."

So Phronsie sat up very straight in Mrs. Pepper's lap, and the wonderful act began, Polly being the musician, and singing her merriest, while she drummed with her fingers on the board that Ben had fixed across the stone table, running up and down with so many little quirks and quavers it was really very remarkable to hear.

Ben held up a big ring, saving the one with the red border for the last.

"Hold it higher," said Joel, in between his roars and grimaces.

"No, sir," said Ben, firmly, "you aren't going to jump any higher. Go on."

"'Tisn't half as high as I jumped the other day," grumbled Joel.

"Go on," commanded Ben, "or I won't hold it at all," and Polly bobbed her head at him as she drummed away. "Hurry up," she seemed to say. So Joel sprang off from the lower branch of the apple tree and went zip-tear-bang, at the paper ring. But instead of going through, he knocked it out of Ben's hand, and went with it, rolling over and over on the ground. When he got up to his feet, the big paper ring was all in tags, and the hair on the monkey's head was all over his eyes, and covering his red face.

"Never mind, Joe," said Polly, running away from her piano, to pull him out straight and fix him nice again, "you'll do it fine next time, I guess."

"Ben jiggled it," announced Joel, stoutly, and with a rueful face as he saw the broken ring.

"No, I didn't," declared Ben; "I kept it as steady as could be. But you sprawled your legs and knocked it out of my hand. Take a

good flying leap, Joe, and keep your eye on the red border."

"Yes; I'm so glad there's a red border on it," said Polly, hopping back to make her fingers run merrily up and down her piano once more.

So Joel took a flying leap, keeping his black eyes fixed on the red border, and came through the ring so splendidly that everybody hopped up to their feet, and shouted and clapped their hands, Grandma exclaiming, "La — for the land's sake!" while Phronsie slid out of Mrs. Pepper's lap and gave a squeal of delight.

"Hoh! that's nothing!" declared Joel, and before Ben could say anything he ran and jumped up on the lower limb of the apple tree, and winding his sturdy legs around the trunk, and then springing from one branch to another, there he was, before any one knew it, on the topmost bough!

"O mercy me — he'll be killed!" screamed Grandma, who saw it first. Mother Pepper turned swiftly. "Joel!" she was going to exclaim. But in a minute she knew it would be the worst thing in the world to do. So she tried to smile and to say, "Come down, Joey, and be careful."

But Joel was swinging and slashing the long rope tail, and having a delightful time up there in the branches, and roaring and screaming so, that Mother Pepper's quiet tones couldn't possibly be heard.

Polly's face turned very white. "Oh, Ben, he'll be killed!" she exclaimed. "He won't look at us, and we can't make him hear," for by that time everybody was shouting at him to come down, and Phronsie was crying as if her heart would break.

"I'm goin' to hang by my tail," screamed Joel at them, and before any of them could realize what he was doing, he had swung the long rope over a branch and twisted it up in a knot, then he swung himself out, and let his feet free from the bough.

Mrs. Pepper seized Ben's arm and said hoarsely, "Go up after him." Ben was halfway up the trunk as fast as he could go, which wasn't very good speed, as he was always slower at such things than the other little Peppers. When Joel, head downward, saw him coming up, he screamed, "Ha! I'm a monkey, and you can't catch me," and he swung farther out than ever. The knot he had thought so safe untwisted, and

down, down, he went, the long rope curling through the air to wind around his legs.

It was all done in one dreadful moment, and when they ran to pick him up, everything seemed to turn black around Polly's eyes. She never knew how it happened, but there was Mother Pepper sitting on the grass with Joel's head in her lap, and Mrs. Beebe hurrying into the kitchen for water and cloths to wash the blood away, and Grandma waddling down the lane to get things from the cottage. And Ben sliding down the tree, the rest of the little Peppers crouching up in misery around Mamsie and her boy.

Polly's white lips only formed the words, "Dr. Fisher — I'll go — you stay here and help Mamsie," and she was off in a flash. For Polly could run the swiftest of any of them, her feet hardly touching the ground.

Somebody called her name as she spun along the dusty ground, but she didn't stop — only sped on. But by laying the whip smartly over the back of his horse, the man in the wagon came up by her side and yelled at her, and then she saw that it was Mr. Tisbett.

"Oh, I can't stop, sir!" she wailed, clasping her hands, "for Joel's dead, I guess."

"Now you just git in here," commanded Mr. Tisbett, getting down to the ground; and without waiting for Polly to obey, he picked her up and set her on the seat. "I take it you're goin' after th' doctor. Now he ain't to home, for this is his day for Hillsbury, ye know. But I tell you," he added briskly, as he saw Polly's face, "I'm a master hand at doctorin', an' I'm goin' to take a look at Joel." All this time he was getting over the wheel and into his seat, and turning down the road toward the little brown house.

"What's th' matter with Joel?" he asked at length, after slapping Black Bill smartly, who now ran at his liveliest pace.

"He fell from the apple tree," said Polly, in a low voice. "Oh, Mr. Tisbett, could you go a little bit faster, please?" she implored.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Tisbett, obligingly, and applying the whip again to the horse's flanks. "Now it's lucky enough my stage-coach got a mite broke this morning, an' I had to wait over a trip, and so I've met you. We'll soon be there, Polly, don't you worry a mossel. I fell out o' apple trees time after time when I was a boy, and it hain't hurt me none. Git ap, Bill! An'

at any rate, I'll fix Joel up. I used to be a doctor 'fore I was a stage-driver. Ye hain't never known that, hev ye, Polly?" and he smiled down on her.

"No," said Polly, with a thrill of hope at her heart. "Oh, if Black Bill only would go a little faster!"

"Fact," said Mr. Tisbett, rolling the tobacco quid into his other cheek. "I was what ye might call a nat'ral doctor, bone-setter, and all that; never took a diplomy — but land sakes alive, I donno's it's necessary, when ye got to make a bone into shape, to set an' pint to a piece o' paper to tell where ye was eddicated. Git up an' set th' bone, I say, an' if ye can do it all right, I guess it's a good enough job to the feller what owns the bone. Git ap, Bill!" and they drew up in front of the little brown house.

Mr. Tisbett never waited to ask questions, although Mrs. Pepper looked at him inquiringly, but just took hold of the job he had come to do, and Polly explained to Mamsie. And presently everybody was obeying the stage-driver just as soon as he spoke a word. And his big hands were just as gentle and light, and his fingers, that always seemed so clumsy holding the old

leather reins, were a great deal softer in their touch than Mother Pepper's own, as they wandered all over Joel's body.

"That boy's all right, and bound to scare ye a great many times, Marm," at last he said. "Don't you worry a mite, Mrs. Pepper, he'll come out o' it, when he gits ready."

But Mother Pepper shook her head as she hung over her boy.

"Mammy," said Polly, crawling up to her like a hurt little thing, "I do believe Mr. Tisbett knows," she whispered. "I do, Mammy."

But Mrs. Pepper only shook her head worse than ever.

"What shall we do, Ben?" cried Polly, rushing up to him; "just look at her, Ben. Oh, what can we do for Mamsie! She's never been like that."

"Nothing," said Ben, gloomily; "we can't any of us do anything till Joel comes to himself. There won't anything else help her."

But Mrs. Pepper suddenly raised her head and looked at them keenly. "Come here, Polly," and at the same instant it seemed, so quickly she obeyed, Polly was at her side.

"Mother feels that her boy will be all right," said Mrs. Pepper. And she even smiled.

XXII

THE MINISTER'S CHICKENS

MR. TISBETT was right. And before he left, Joel was sitting on his knee, and hearing various accounts of Black Bill; how he ran away once when he was a colt, and Mr. Tisbett never caught him till he'd chased him over into Hillsbury; and how once, when the pole broke going down a hill, Black Bill had held Jerry from kicking and plunging loose, and brought 'em all down in safety to the bottom.

"I tell you, sir," declared Mr. Tisbett, bringing his big fist down on his knee, "that's a horse for you, ef ever there was one. And you shall go along of me sometime, Joe, and have a ride in th' stage-coach again, if your Ma'll let you."

"Hooray!" cried Joel, hugely pleased. "When I'm a man, Mr. Tisbett, I'm goin' to have a stage just like yours, and two horses just exactly like Black Bill."

"Take my advice," said the stage-driver, "an

don't try to get two horses exactly alike, 'cause you're bound to be disappointed. Now there's Jerry; ain't a mite like Black Bill, but he's awful good to run along with him."

"Then I shall have one like Jerry, instead," decided Joel, folding his hands in great satisfaction, since Mr. Tisbett advised it so. "Now I'm going to finish my circus, and be monkey." And he began to get down from the stage-driver's knee.

"You hold on there," said Mr. Tisbett, firmly; "you've been monkey long enough, and scart your Ma and all on us nigh almost to death. Don't you go up that tree again, Joel Pepper! If you do, I won't take you on no more stage rides with me. You hear me, now."

Yes, Joel did hear, so although he whimpered and teased, and declared he hadn't played monkey more than a half a minute, and he'd lost most all his circus, Mr. Tisbett sat up stiff and straight, holding him tightly, and said, "If I hear of you goin' up that ere tree again, you don't go with me." So Joel promised he would be very good, and then he hopped down and got into Mamsie's lap, and let himself be cuddled to his heart's content.

"My land!" exploded Mrs. Beebe, when quiet was restored. "I declare, I'm all beat out. You could knock me down with a feather," she confided to Polly. "Well, well, well, that boy's saved for something. Now, Joel, why don't you have the animals now? Did you like 'em?" and she settled her glasses to get a good look at him, and assure herself that he was really uninjured. "It's a miracle," she kept saying to Grandma, who bobbed her cap all the while, as if she heard every word.

"They were awful good," said Joel, in satisfaction. "Give me the rest of 'em, Polly," and he held out his hand.

"So you shall have 'em, Joel," cried Polly, glad to think there was something she could do, and she ran and brought the little sugar cooky animals where she had fixed them in some large leaves ready for Joel to pass them around among the company at the close of the performance.

"Mamsie must have the first one," said Joel, picking out the biggest and best, with the largest currant eyes, to force it between Mrs. Pepper's pale lips, "then Polly next."

"Oh, no, Joe," said Polly, "I'm not company.

Give one to Grandma and to Mrs. Beebe first."

"Oh, you pretty creature you!" exclaimed Grandma. "So you want me to have a cake?" as Joel turned to her with one in his hand.

"'Tisn't a cake — it's an animal," corrected Joel, irritably.

"Yes, yes — so 'tis a cake," repeated Grandma Bascom, taking the animal.

"'Tisn't," said Joel. "Mamsie, make her stop saying things that aren't so, over and over."

"Joel," said Polly, quickly, "Mrs. Beebe hasn't any animal. Why don't you give her a — let me see," and she considered deeply. "I'd give her a bird, Joel, here's a lovely one," and she pounced on a most remarkable specimen in the bird line one would wish to see. "Mrs. Beebe, wouldn't you like that?" she asked.

"Oh, I should so," replied Mrs. Beebe, smiling all over her face to see how well Joel was, and putting out her hand. "Bless your heart, Joel, I'd rather have the bird than any other."

"Had you?" asked Joel, greatly pleased.

"Yes, indeed I had. I always set dreadfully by birds," said Mrs. Beebe. So Joel gave her

the bird, then he leaned over and picked out a horse, very much baked on one side, and with one leg shorter than the other "That's for you, Mr. Tisbett," he said.

"That suits me," said Mr. Tisbett, heartily. "Well, now I never! Seems to me I can't eat it, 'twould be almost like chewing up a critter, but I'll keep it to remember you by," and he slipped it into his big pocket. Then he got up and shook himself. "And now I must be a-goin'. Don't you be a mite worried, Mrs. Pepper, take my advice; that boy'll scare you more times than you can count. So you might as well get used to it. Now look sharp, Joe, and remember what you promised."

"Phronsie must have the—"

"Oh, Joey, I want the piggie, I do," cried Phronsie, whose eyes had been fastened on the cooky animals ever since Polly had brought them up on the beautiful green leaves. "May I, Joel?" she begged.

"Hoh, that isn't good!" said Joel, disdainfully. "He's a horrid old pig."

"Hush, Joey," said Polly, and her face turned rosy red, remembering Mrs. Beebe. But old Mrs. Beebe only laughed, and said she knew

the pig wasn't baked good, he would whirl over on one side in the pan. And sometime she would bake Joel a good nice one. But Phronsie kept on pleading for this particular pig. "Do, Joel, please," she begged, "give me the dear, sweet piggie." So Joel put it in her hand, when she cuddled it lovingly up against her fat little neck, not thinking of such a thing as eating it.

And then David must pick out the one he wanted, and then Ben. And then all over again, around and around, till there wasn't another cooky animal left. And when he saw that, Joel hopped down from Mamsie's lap and marched up to Mrs. Beebe. "Your animals were better'n mine," he said.

"They don't tumble out of trees," said Mrs. Beebe, laughing. And then everybody got very merry, and Polly said, Could they play a game? and Mrs. Pepper looked at Joel hopping about, and she said, Yes, with a glad thrill that her boy was safe. "It will help him to forget his accident," she said to Polly. So after all, the circus wound up with a fine ending.

And in the midst of it Mrs. Brown came

panting over, having run nearly every step of the way. When she saw Joel spinning around in The Barberry Bush, she leaned against the side of the little brown house, and said, "O my!"

Mrs. Pepper hurried over to her. "Sally ran home and said Joel had tumbled from a tree, so I brought these over as soon's I could," panted Mrs. Brown, opening her apron, and there were ever so many bottles of medicine.

"O dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Pepper, with a thankful throb to think they were not wanted, and, "You are so good, Mrs. Brown."

"So we go round the barberry bush," sang Joel, piping out the loudest of any one, and kicking up his heels as he danced.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Brown, "I never did, in all my life! Just hear that boy!"

And she hadn't been gone but a moment or two, carrying her apron full of medicines with her, before Mrs. Henderson came hurrying along down the dusty road. Her face was flushed, and she looked anxious enough. Mrs. Pepper said, "Run, Polly, and meet her, and tell her Joel is all right. Bless her! She is a parson's wife!"

So Polly ran with all her might, and stood before Mrs. Henderson, flushed and almost breathless.

"Joey's all well," she managed to say.

"Thank you, Polly," said Mrs. Henderson, smiling down into the flushed face. "And I am so glad to know it, for Peletiah came home very frightened. Well, take your mother this. Stay, I better go and see her, I guess." So she went up to the little group back in the orchard, and heard all about Joel's accident from himself, as he wanted to tell it all, up to the time when they picked him up.

Mrs. Henderson wiped her eyes many times during the recital, then she drew Joel to her. "You must come over to see my new chickens some day."

"I'll go to-morrow," said Joel, sociably, "if Mamsie'll let me."

"Oh, Joey!" reproved Mrs. Pepper. "Please excuse him," to Mrs. Henderson, "he doesn't think what he is saying."

"So you shall, Joey," said the parson's wife, with a pleasant smile, "and bring the others with you. Let them come, Mrs. Pepper, do."

"Ben can't go, of course," said Mrs. Pepper, "and Polly can't, either," and her face grew sober, "for Mr. Atkins says I may get some more coats to-morrow morning, and she's getting so she helps me a good deal."

"Never mind," said Polly, trying to laugh. How she would love to see those new chickens!

"Polly shall come some other time," said Mrs. Henderson, with a kindly smile on her face. "To-morrow afternoon, Mrs. Pepper, at three o'clock, please let them come over."

So the next afternoon Joel, with many injunctions to be good, escorted the other two children to Parson Henderson's, Mrs. Pepper and Polly watching them from the door stone as they trudged off down the road, Phronsie clinging to Joel's hand, and David on the other side.

"She's a parson's wife, now!" said Mrs. Pepper for the fiftieth time, as the children turned the bend in the road, and wiping her eyes she went back into the house to pick up her sewing and go to work. "Well, Polly, you and I will have a fine time to fly at this now."

The two needles clicked away busily enough as Polly sat down on the cricket at Mrs. Pepper's

feet. "Whatever should we do without Mr. Atkins, too, Mamsie?" she said.

"Polly," said Mother Pepper, suddenly, and she laid down her work a moment, although time was precious enough, "Mother's sorry you couldn't go, too. But a nice time will come for you sometime, I hope," though she sighed.

"Never mind me, Mammy," said Polly, cheerily.

"But I can't help minding, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, sadly, "when I think how few nice times you have. But I'll try all the harder." And she picked up her work again, and made the needle fly faster than ever.

"And it's so very nice that Joel can go and see those new chickens," said Polly, suppressing a sigh, "after he fell yesterday, and Phronsie, oh, you can't think, Mamsie! how she runs on about the chickens she saw there once."

"Yes, it is nice," said Mrs. Pepper, but she sighed again.

Meantime Joel was in a state of supreme delight. Kneeling down in front of the coop, with his face pressed close to the bars, he was watching every movement of the fluffy little

things, counting them over and over, and speculating what he would do if they were his, Phronsie crouching down by one side, while David was as close on the other, and all three children speechless with delight.

Presently Joel broke the silence. "I'm going to take out one," he said.

"Oh, no, Joe!" cried Davie, in alarm, and tumbling backward from the coop.

"Yes, I am," said Joel, obstinately, who never could brook interference. "It won't hurt it a bit, and I'll put it right back."

Phronsie didn't hear him, her whole attention being absorbed by the wonderful chickens. So Joel cautiously pulled up one slat of the coop a very little way. "There, you see," he cried in exultation, "I can do it just as easy as not;" when a bee, humming its way along, stung him smartly on the arm, and Joel twitched so suddenly that up went the slat quite high, and before he could stop them, out walked the old mother hen, and two of her children.

"Oh, Joe, Joe! they're out!" screamed David. Phronsie rolled over on the grass in a little ball, as Joel knocked against her, and nobody thought for a moment of shutting the bar down. So

three more chickens stepped out and hopped away over the grass.

"Oh, Joe, Joe, they're all coming out!" cried David, quite beside himself with horror.

"Shut the bar! shut the bar!" screamed Joel, running hither and thither, and only making the mother frantic, in her efforts to get away from him, and to protect her brood.

"I can't," mourned Davie, tugging bravely at it. So Joel stopped chasing the hen and the chickens, and rushed up to slam down the bar, and two more chickens having hopped out in the meantime, there they were — seven downy little balls, hurrying about in a great state of excitement to reach mother, who was clucking noisily for them to hurry and come under her wing.

"Oh, Joe! see what you've done," cried Davie, in distress, trying to help in every direction, but only succeeding in getting in the way. "O dear me! You can't ever get 'em back in the coop, in all this world." Phronsie, meanwhile, picked herself up, and eagerly entered into the chase, gurgling in delight as she pattered first after one little fluffy ball, and then another.

"Yes, I can," said Joel, confidently, rushing

here and there. "You stand still, Dave, and don't let 'em get by you. Then I'll drive 'em up."

But after about five minutes of this sort of work, Joel found that he couldn't do it very well, for as fast as he got one chicken headed for David, the others all scattered in every direction, while Mistress Biddy scampered and waddled and clacked to her children, till the parsonage garden seemed full of hens and chickens. At last Joel stopped and wiped his hot face, David looking at him from a distance in despair.

"You stay there, Dave, I'm going to tell 'em," and Joel marched off with an awful feeling at his heart. But he didn't dare to stop to think about it, but mounted the steps of the parsonage and went down the wide hall. There was nobody to be seen, and Joel was just going to run out to the kitchen, if, perhaps, Mrs. Henderson could be found there. Suddenly the study door opened, and there stood the minister himself in the doorway.

"Well, Joel," said Parson Henderson, kindly, "I'm glad to see you. Do you want anything, my boy?"

Joel's knees knocked together, but he answered, "I've let all the hens and chickens out."

"You've let all the hens and chickens out?" repeated the minister, but he only half understood, and stood staring down into Joel's black eyes.

"Yes, sir," said Joel, twisting his brown hands together tightly. If he should cry now, before his story was told, maybe the minister would never get those chickens into the coop. He must make him understand. "They're all running everywhere in the grass," he added miserably.

"Do you mean Mrs. Henderson's new chickens?" asked the minister, starting a bit. Then he added composedly, "Oh, no, Joel, they're quite safe. She is very particular about looking after the coop herself."

"But they are," gasped Joel. Then he forgot that it was the minister, and seized his hand. "Please — they're running awfully, and they'll die, maybe."

Parson Henderson bestowed on him a long searching gaze. "How did they get out?" he asked.

"I let 'em out," blurted Joel, "and they're all running. Do come, sir." And he fairly tugged at the minister's hand as if it had been David's.

The parson went swiftly down the long hall, Joel hanging to his hand. Just then a voice called down the winding stairs, "*Jotham! Jotham!*"

It was Miss Jerusha. Joel gave one glance up the stairs, and held tighter than ever to the minister's hand. "Do come," he cried, in an agony. "Oh, please! sir."

"Mehitable's chickens are out!" screamed Miss Jerusha, now appearing at the top of the stairs. She was in a short gown and petticoat, and had been doing up her hair, having just taken the ends of the side wisps out of her mouth, where she had conveyed them for the easier combing of the back locks.

"I know it," said Parson Henderson, quietly; "Joel has just told me." With that he pressed the little brown hand that was in his own.

"Go back to your room, Jerusha," he said. "I'll see to the chickens."

"And there's those other two Pepper children," cried Miss Jerusha after him, with a tart

look at Joel, "all over the place. And Mehitable is baking a cake for 'em — think of it!"

"Is she baking a cake for us?" cried Joel, finding his tongue, as the minister, still holding his hand, went out toward the garden.

"Yes," said Parson Henderson, "she is, Joel."

"And I've let out all her hens and chickens!" cried Joel. "O dear, dear!" and the tears he couldn't hold back any longer rained all down his chubby face.

"See here," Parson Henderson stopped a minute, "if you're going to help me, Joel, you can't cry, that's very certain. Why, I expect you and I will have every one of those chickens safe and sound in that coop in — well, in next to no time."

"I'll help you!" cried Joel, dashing off the tears at once, and swallowing hard. "Oh, do hurry, please, Mr. Henderson," pulling hard at the kind hand.

"Softly — softly there, Joel, my boy," said the minister. "If we're going to get those chickens into that coop, we mustn't scare them to begin with. Now, you run into the barn, and get a little corn in the quart measure."

So Joel, glad of something to do, dropped the minister's hand, and ran off at lightning speed, and soon raced back again with the quart measure half full of corn.

"That's well," said Parson Henderson, approvingly. "Now then, the first thing to do is to make the mother go back into the coop. Here, Mrs. Biddy, take a bit of this nice corn." He flung out a kernel or two to the hen, whose feathers that had started up in a ruffle and fluff, at sight of Joel, now drooped, and her excited clacking stopped.

"Keep perfectly still, Joel," said Parson Henderson, over his shoulder.

All this time, Phronsie and David, at sight of Parson Henderson's approach, had stood as if frozen to the ground, never taking their eyes from his face, except to look at Joel. The parson then went along a few steps nearer to the coop, scattering one or two kernels as he went. Mistress Biddy eyed them all wistfully. "Come on," said the minister, gently.

"Cluck — cluck," said the mother hen, sociably, and she waddled slowly, and picked up the first kernels. These were so good that she came readily after the next, and so followed the

parson, as he let fall two more. The little fluffy balls, when they saw their mother so employed, all scampered like mad after her, to surround her. At last, she was so busily employed, that she didn't notice that she was running into an angle formed by the coop and the end of the barn. There was a rush. A sudden squawk, and the parson emerged from this corner, with Mistress Biddy in his hands.

"Now, Joel, you can help me so much," he said cheerily. "Run and push up the bar to the coop. Be careful not to let any more chickens out. There, that's right!" In went Mistress Biddy, who gave an indignant fluff to her gray feathers, and then cackled crossly, and the bar flew down into place.

"That's fine!" exclaimed the minister in great satisfaction, getting up straight again. "Now, Joel, it won't be such a task to catch the little chickens. Come away from the coop, and they'll run up when they hear her call," which was indeed the fact. They soon began to scamper as hard as they could from all directions as Mistress Biddy set up a smart "cluck, cluck," until all of the seven were swarming over each other to get into the coop to mother.

It was surprising, then, to see the minister's hands; they seemed to be here, there, and everywhere, and to pounce upon those little fluffy balls with unerring aim, and presently, there they were, Joel lifting the bar when bidden, in the coop, "peeping" away and huddling up to the dear gray feathery nest. The chickens who hadn't run out came up, as if wanting to hear the story, and what it was like to be out in the world.

Mr. Henderson sat down on the long grass. "That's a very good job done, Joel," he said.

Just then the kitchen door opened, and a pleasant voice called, "Come, Joel and David and Phronsie Pepper, I've got a new baked cake for you."

XXIII

THE BLACKBERRIES AND THE BULL

"NOW, Joel," said Polly, a few days after, "you mustn't tease for the pie, you know, 'cause Mamsie may not be able to get the white flour."

"P'r'aps she will," said Joel, swinging his tin pail, and kicking the sweet fern with his bare feet; "then, Polly, we could have it, couldn't we?"

"Maybe," said Polly, with her thoughts not so much on blackberry pie, as how good it was to be out of doors for a whole afternoon. "Oh, Joe, what a big butterfly!"

"Hoh — that's nothing!" said Joel, who was rather tired of butterflies. "I'm going to pick bushels and bushels of blackberries, Polly."

"You'll do well if you pick a quart," said Polly, laughing, remembering his past experiences. "Oh, Joel, isn't it just lovely to go

blackberrying like this!" and her brown eyes sparkled.

"The bushes scratch like everything," said Joel, with another kick at the sweet fern.

"It's nice to go blackberrying," hummed Phronsie, holding fast to a little tin cup the rag-man had presented her on his last visit. "I'm going to pick ever and ever so many, to carry home to my Mamsie."

"So you shall," cried Polly, rapturously; "and, children, I never saw anything so perfectly beautiful as it is this afternoon! Isn't the sky blue!"

Little David looked up and smiled. Joel threw back his head and squinted critically. "I wish I could go sailing up there on that cloud," he said.

"I don't," said Polly, merrily, swinging her tin pail. "I'd rather be down here and going blackberrying with you children. Well, come on, we ought to hurry, 'cause we want to take home as many as we can."

"You're always hurrying us, Polly Pepper," grumbled Joel, lagging behind. "What for, if we can't have any pie?"

"Well, we can carry home the berries to

Mamsie, anyway," said Polly, moving on very fast. Phronsie trotted after her with a very happy face.

"Now, children," said Polly, when they reached the place where the bars were to be taken down, "we must keep together, and not straggle off. Remember, Joe; then when we're ready to go home, it won't be such a piece of work to get started."

Joel was already pulling at the bars. "Come on, Dave, and help," he called.

"We'll go right across this corner," said Polly, when the bars were put back, and they were on the other side, "and then, says I, we'll soon be at the blackberry patch. O my, just see that bird!"

"Polly's always stopping to look at birds," said Joel.

"I like 'em, too," said David. "And that one is just beautiful."

"It's just beautiful," hummed Phronsie, who wanted to stop every moment and pick clover blossoms, or the big waving green grasses.

"Well, come on, Pet," said Polly, seeing this, "or we shan't ever get to the blackberry patch;

and then, says I, what would Mamsie ever do for her berries!"

At this, such a dreadful distress seized the whole bunch of little Peppers, that they one and all scuttled as fast as they could through the long grass, Phronsie not looking back once to pick a single blossom; and Polly presently had her company all marshalled up in good order in a perfect thicket of blackberry bushes, where the berries hung as thick and ripe as could be.

For a few minutes no one spoke; the big blackberries tumbling into the tin pails making the only noise, though Phronsie dropped hers into the grass as often as she put one in her little cup. And they worked so fast, that no one noticed that Polly's blue sky was getting overcast by white patches of puffy clouds that looked as if they were chasing each other. At last Joel said, "Ow!" and began to complain that he was all scratched up by the prickly bushes, and when Phronsie heard that, she set down her tin cup and held up her fat little arms. "See, Polly," she said gravely.

"O dear me, now that's too bad, Pet!" So Polly had to come out from her nice little clump

where she was picking fast, and kiss the little red marks on Phronsie's arms. "Now don't lean in the bushes again; I'll show you a place. There," and Polly pointed to some low branches that stood out; and the blackberries on them were thick and ripe.

"Ooh!" said Phronsie, when she saw them; and she forgot all about her arms, that prickled and ached, and Polly flew back to her clump again.

Rumble—rumble! "Oh, boys!" gasped Polly, "there can't be a thunder-storm coming!" and she poked her head out from her clump, and stared up at the sky in dismay. "There surely is! Now we must run home like everything." She skipped out and seized Phronsie's arm. "Come, Pet," and not stopping to look, she set out upon a run. Phronsie began to wail, and then pulled back. "I've left my cup, Polly," she said.

"Didn't you bring it?" cried Polly, pausing a minute. "Boys," as she saw that they hadn't started, "come this minute, and bring Phronsie's cup," she screamed. "Now come on, child; they run so much faster they will soon overtake us."

Phronsie, with her mind at rest about her cup,

kept up as well as she could by Polly's side. "I guess I shall have to carry you," at last said Polly, as the boys came rushing up in high glee over their dash across the meadow.

"Where's my cup?" asked Phronsie, holding out eager hands.

"Here," said Joel, thrusting it at her. "Now come on, Dave, let's see who will get to the bars first."

Phronsie peered within the tin cup. "Why — where —" she began. Then she turned two big sorrowful eyes up toward Polly. "They aren't there," she said.

"What — the berries? Oh, never mind, Pet, you shall have some of mine," said Polly, whose only thought was how to get home as quickly as possible. "Goodness me, child!" as a raindrop splashed on her nose. "I really shall have to carry you," and Polly picked her up, and tried to hurry over the ground.

"But they won't be mine I picked," wailed Phronsie. "Polly, I want my very own."

"Well, the boys spilled 'em, I s'pose," said Polly, staggering on, her own tin pail swinging from her arms, while Phronsie grew heavier and heavier every minute, and the clouds

blacker and blacker. "Dear me, I didn't think it was so far across this meadow!" when suddenly Joel screamed out, "Oh, Polly, he's coming!" and there, from the further corner of the field, was walking quite smartly a bull, and he was looking straight at her and Phronsie.

"I mustn't run," said Polly; "Mamsie said once, I remember, I must look straight at any cross animal, and not let 'em see that I was afraid." So she set Phronsie down on the ground. "Now, Pet, don't run, but walk to Joel as fast as you can," for Joel and David were over the bars, which they hadn't taken the trouble to take down for themselves, intending to do it for Polly and Phronsie when they should come up.

Phronsie set off at once, since Polly had told her to do so, and was soon nearly at the bars. Joel sprang over to meet her.

"Don't run, Joe," called Polly, in a warning voice; "just take her over the bars." Then she slowly went backward, keeping her brown eyes fastened on the bull, who still walked toward her, with his eyes fixed on her face.

Joel got Phronsie safely over the bars, David, with trembling fingers, pulling her from the other side, and all was going on well when Polly

stepped backward into a little gully, and over she went in a heap. In a minute, the bull tossed his head and quickened his pace, and by the time she was up on her feet, he was coming on toward her at a trot, and with an angry light in his eyes.

All of a sudden, Joel shot past her. "I'll stop him, Polly," he said cheerily, and he dashed in between her and the bull, who, not liking this interference, now shook his head angrily. Joel then turned off, and the animal went after him.

"Joel, you'll be killed!" cried Polly, rushing after him, to make the bull turn from the chase. But it was useless; for both were now well across the field, Joel running like wildfire, and the bull snorting and kicking up the ground in his rage after him. And Polly, straining her eyes, pretty soon saw Joel turn swiftly and duck, and the bull run with full force against a tree, before he could stop himself. And there was Joel clambering over a high stone wall. Then she started and rushed for the high bars, climbed them in a flash, and when the disappointed bull came running back, there she was, with the other two, huddled up in a place

of safety. And in a minute Joel scrambled around from his stone wall. So there they were, all together, safe and sound!

"Oh, Joel, are you really here?" exclaimed Polly, laughing and crying over him together.

"Yes," said Joel, "I am, Polly;" then he looked up from her arms that she had thrown around his neck. "You've lost your berries, Polly Pepper, and the tin pail. Now what will Mamsie say?"

"I guess she won't say anything," said Polly, with a little shiver. "Come, children, we must run, now, as fast as we can, for it is going to rain like everything."

"Joey," said Polly, when they paused a moment to take breath, "you must give Phronsie some of your berries when we get home; that's a good boy, for I promised her some of mine. Hers got spilt, and now I haven't any."

"Well, mine shook out of the pail," said Joel, dismally, "when I swung it at that old bull's face."

"I'll give her mine," declared Davie. "You shall have 'em all, Phronsie."

Phronsie, at that, could not express her

delight, but she clasped her hands, and gave a great sigh of satisfaction.

When they all reached home, there was Mamsie watching for them anxiously. And they all scampered in out of the rain like so many rabbits.

"Children, I've got such a surprise for you," said Mother Pepper, as soon as she could take off the wet clothes from Phronsie, and get her into something dry. "Now, you all better get your things off, and hang 'em to dry by the stove, and get on some clean clothes."

"I ain't wet, and we haven't got any berries, 'cept Dave, an' he gave 'em to Phronsie," said Joel. "They all got shook out of the pails, Polly's and mine did, when the bull chased us."

"When the bull chased you!" repeated Mrs. Pepper, while her black eyes roved from one to the other.

"Oh, Joel, don't tell Mamsie this way," said Polly, pulling his jacket. "Besides, Phronsie doesn't know what we ran for."

"David," said Mrs. Pepper, "take Phronsie into the bedroom and shut the door. Now then, Polly and Joel, tell me all about it, every word."

So they did, not sparing themselves a bit of the account, Joel cutting in when he thought Polly didn't tell enough what she did.

"But oh, Mamsie, you can't think how splendid Joe was!" cried Polly, with shining eyes; "he couldn't have done better if he'd had a sword and gun." Then she told it all over — his part — dilating at great length upon it, until Joel got down on the floor and rolled and kicked in dismay, because he couldn't stop her.

"Make her stop, Mamsie," he howled.

"And oh, when Ben comes home, won't I have a splendid story to tell him!" finished Polly. "How I wish he'd come now," and the queerest thing was, the door opened, and in he walked.

"I got through earlier than I expected," he said. "Why, what makes you all look so queer?"

"We've had enough to make us look queer," answered Mrs. Pepper. Her eyes shone too! "Polly will tell you," she added.

So Polly, glad enough to tell the story, went over it all, bit by bit. When she came to Joel's part, Ben seized him from off the floor. "See here, I'll give you a ride, Joe, in honor of it," and setting him on his shoulder, Ben pranced

around and around the old kitchen, till Joel screamed with delight.

"I tell you what, that was fine!" declared Ben, and his eyes shone too. Then Phronsie drummed on the bedroom door, and begged to be let out, in spite of all that Davie could do to stop her.

"Do run and let her out, and Davie, too," said Mrs. Pepper, quite as excited as either Polly or Ben.

"I'll go," said Joel, flying off with alacrity. So Phronsie and David came running in, well pleased to be once more in the midst of things; and then it was time for supper, and all the while she was laying the cloth and getting out the dishes, Polly was looking at Joel, and her brown head went up proudly, and every once in a while she would run over and drop a kiss on his stubby hair.

And when Davie went up to the loft back of him that night, as they were going to bed, Joel turned around on the upper stair. "We'll play bull to-morrow, Dave," he said.

"No, I don't want to," said little Davie, with a shiver.

"Pooh! I do; it's splendid! You may be the bull, if you want to," said Joel, generously.

"I don't want to," protested Davie, fretfully, and hurrying off his clothes, to tuck into bed, where he huddled down.

"Well, you've got to," said Joel, determinedly, giving his jacket a fling to the corner, "'cause if you don't, I'll be the bull, and chase you just awful. So there now, Dave Pepper!"

But Davie was spared that tribulation, for when the next day came, Mrs. Pepper had so much work for them all to do, that the chase dropped entirely out of Joel's mind, even if he had a moment in which to accomplish it. The great surprise that Mrs. Pepper had told them of, now came out, everybody being so full of the adventure with the bull, that it completely crowded out everything else.

"Now you can't guess," said Mrs. Pepper, smiling at them all, when she had repeated, "such a surprise, children," "so I might as well tell you. It was—"

"Oh, Mammy, let us guess," howled Joel. "I know—it is a horse! Somebody's given you one."

A perfect shout greeted this, but Joel was in no wise dashed. "I don't care," he said, "that would be a surprise."

"Yes, I think it would be," laughed Ben. "Guess again, Joe, and don't give such a wild one."

"Then I guess it's some candy," said Joel, coming down with a long jump to a possibility; "and do give us some right away."

"No, it isn't candy," said Mrs. Pepper, smiling at him.

"Then I don't care what it is," declared Joel, turning off indifferently; "and say, Polly, what have you got for breakfast?"

"The same as ever," said Polly, with only half an ear for him, her mind being intent on the splendid surprise; "you know, Joel; what makes you ask?"

"Mean old breakfast!" said Joel, with a grimace. "Polly, why don't we ever have anything but mush?"

"You know that too, Joe," said Polly, with a cold shoulder for him. "Do let me be, I want to guess Mamsie's surprise. O dear me! whatever can it be?" She wrinkled up her brows, and lost herself in a brown study.

"I guess I know," said Ben, slowly, after a good look at Mrs. Pepper's face.

"What?" roared Joel, interested again, since Ben had guessed it.

"It's blackberries," answered Ben, with a shrewd nod of his head. "Isn't it, Mamsie?"

"Yes, it is," said Mrs. Pepper; "you've guessed it, sure enough, Bensie."

"Hoh — old blackberries!" cried Joel, dreadfully disappointed, and falling back to the other corner.

"The blackberries aren't to be ours," said Mrs. Pepper; "that is —"

"Not to be ours," repeated the children together, while even Ben looked surprised.

"No." Mrs. Pepper laughed outright to see their faces. "You can't guess," she said again, "so I'll tell you. Mrs. Brown is sick, and I'm to make her blackberry jell over here; and she's given me some sugar, besides the pay she'll give me, so now we can have our pie."

There was a perfect babel at this, the five little Peppers having always before them the hope of some day hearing their mother say they should have a blackberry pie — to make up for not being able to accomplish the chicken pie that Polly and all the others had so longed for — and which was quite beyond their expecta-

tions. Now the blackberry pie was really coming!

"Make it now. Make it now, Mamsie, do," begged Joel, his mouth watering.

"Goodness me!" exclaimed Polly; "why, it's before breakfast, Joe. The idea of teasing Mamsie to do it now."

"And I can't do it just after breakfast, either," said Mrs. Pepper, "for I must begin as soon as I can on the jell, and you must all help me. There is ever so much you can all be useful in, about making jell. All but Ben, he's got to go to work, you know."

"When will you make the pie, then?" cried Joel, trying to smother his disappointment, and finding it hard work to do so.

"Just as soon as ever this jell is done and out of the way," said Mother Pepper, in her cheeriest tones. "So, Polly, fly at getting the breakfast ready, and when that's eaten, we'll all, except Ben, tackle the jell."

When the dishes were all cleared off, and Polly was washing them, Mrs. Pepper turned to Joel. "Run over to Mrs. Brown's now, Joe, and get her kettle."

"What kettle?" asked Joe, who didn't relish

being turned out of the kitchen in all the bustle of getting ready for the jelly-making.

"The preserve-kettle," answered Mrs. Pepper. "She'll tell you where 'tis. I told her I'd send you over for it. And be real still, Joe, and don't ask her questions, 'cause she's miserable, and is in for a long sick spell if she doesn't look out."

So Joel went off, wishing there weren't any such things in the world as preserve-kettles, and presently, back he came, dragging it after him "bump-bump."

"Oh, Joe," cried Mrs. Pepper, in dismay, "how could you!"

"I don't b'lieve he's hurt it, Mamsie," said Polly, running up to examine the kettle closely; "he couldn't, could he? it's all iron."

"No, I don't suppose he could really hurt it any," said Mrs. Pepper, "but he oughtn't to drag it along and bump it. Things that don't belong to us should be handled extra carefully. Well now, Joe, set down the kettle, and go and wash your hands, you and Davie, and then come back and pick over these blackberries, and Polly'll take hold as soon as she gets through with the work."

"O dear, I don't want to pick over old blackberries," whined Joel.

"Then I suppose you don't care for any of the pie when it's baked," said his mother, coolly; "folks who can't help along in the work, shouldn't have any of the good things when they're passed around."

"Oh, yes, I do want some pie," declared Joel, vehemently. "Dave and me both want some; don't we, Dave?"

"Yes, I do," said little Davie, "very much indeed, Mamsie."

"And I want some pie," echoed Phronsie, hearing the last words, and smoothing down her pink apron.

"So you shall have, Phronsie," promised Mrs. Pepper, "and so shall every one of you who's glad to work, and be useful."

"We'll be useful and work," cried Joel, tumbling out into the woodshed to wash up. "Come on, Dave; then we'll get our pie when it's baked."

XXIV

HOW JOEL STARTED THE FIRE

"NOW," said Polly, to the old stove, "just remember how you acted that day when Mamsie made Mrs. Brown's jelly!" She was standing in front of it, and she drew herself up very straight. "You ought to be ashamed, you naughty thing, you! to make such trouble. Now I've stuffed you up all good and nice in the holes, and when I come home I'll build a fresh fire, and then, says I, you've got to bake a whole batch of bread just as nice!" and Polly shook her brown head very decidedly, and whirled off to the bedroom door. "Come, Phronsie," she called, "hurry up, Pet. O dear me!" Phronsie still sat on the floor by the big bureau, with one red-topped shoe in her hand, and patting it.

"The other one is on, Polly," said Phronsie, as she saw Polly's face; "truly it is," and she stuck one foot out.

"I sh'd think it was," laughed Polly; "every button is in the wrong button-hole, Phronsie."

Phronsie looked at the little shoe very gravely, then her lip quivered.

"Deary me, that's no matter," exclaimed Polly. "We'll have that all right in a twinkling." So she sat down on the floor, and took Phronsie's foot in her lap, and unbuttoned and buttoned up the shoe. "There now, that's done as spick-span as can be."

"What is 'spick-span,' Polly?" said Phronsie.

"Oh, nice — just right. Dear me, it means ever so many things," said Polly, with a little laugh. "Now then, let's have the other shoe on," and she held out her hand for it.

"Let me put it on," cried Phronsie, and drawing it back in alarm; "let me, Polly, oh, I want to put it on my very own self, I do!"

"Well, so you shall," promised Polly, "if you'll hurry, for you know I've got to bake my bread when I get back."

"Isn't there any bread?" asked Phronsie, drawing on the little shoe, and pausing, lost in thought, when it was half on.

"Yes, just enough to last till I get the new loaves baked," said Polly, longing to give the

shoe a twitch and expedite matters; "that is, I think so. I never know how much Joel will eat."

"O dear me!" exclaimed Phronsie, much troubled.

"See here now, Pet," cried Polly, decidedly, "if you don't pull on that shoe quickly, I shall have to do it, for we must start—" which had the effect to make the little red-topped shoe slip on to Phronsie's fat foot in a trice.

"Now then, we're ready," said Polly at last, tying on Phronsie's pink sunbonnet. "Come, Phronsie," and she took her hand. "Joel," she called, as they went out the doorway, "where are you?"

"Here," said Joel, thrusting his head down the loft stairs, where he had heard every word that Polly had said to the old stove.

"Now you and Davie must look after the little brown house," said Polly, feeling very grown up and important, "and be good boys while we're gone down to the store after the bundle of sacks Mr. Atkins has got for Mamsie."

"Yes," said Joel, "we will, Polly."

So Polly ran over the stairs and kissed Joel and little Davie, who crowded up for one also,

and then Phronsie had to come up to be kissed too.

"What are you two boys doing?" asked Polly.

"Nothin'," said Joel.

David was silently digging his toes back and forth on the floor.

"Well, you better come right down and play in the kitchen," said Polly, "then you can look after things;" and she helped Phronsie downstairs and took her hand, and they walked down the path and off on to the road in a very dignified way, for Polly loved to be fine, and it was always a gala occasion when she could dress Phronsie up neat and nice, for a walk to the store.

"I very much wish we had a parasol," sighed Polly, who never could get over the longing for one, ever since she saw Miss Pettingill's green sunshade, with waving fringe, that she carried to church; "but then, I don't suppose I'll ever get one," and she sighed again.

"It's nice to be walking down to the store, Polly," observed Phronsie, peering up at her from the depths of the pink sunbonnet, and smoothing her pink calico gown down in front.

"So it is, Chick," said Polly, with a merry laugh. "I don't b'lieve anybody ever had such perfectly good times as we do, in all this world."

"No, I don't b'lieve they ever did," said Phronsie, shaking her yellow head, delighted to see Polly gay once more. So they walked on quite contentedly.

Meanwhile, Joel turned to Davie up in the loft. "We'll keep the crickets in the box," he said, "till by'n by, an' go down, 'cause Polly said so. And I'm goin' to help her; you'll see." With these mysterious words he shoved a tin box half full of hopping black crickets under the bed, saying, "There, the cover's on. Come on, Dave," and scrambled down the stairs to the kitchen.

Little David went down more slowly, as if something were on his mind. When he reached the kitchen, Joel was standing in front of the stove, a pile of paper was down on the floor at his feet, and he had a match in his hand. Davie stared at him in amazement.

"I'm going to help Polly," declared Joel, loudly, holding his match quite fast with one hand, while he twitched off one of the covers, with the lifter.

"Oh, Joe, you aren't going to make a fire?" cried little David, horror-stricken, and rooted to the spot.

"Of course I am," declared Joel, boldly. "I heard Polly talking to the old stove just before she went away, and she's got to bake bread when she gets home, an' it's all right, an' she'll be so glad to see it ready for her." All the time he was talking he was stuffing the paper into the stove; then he ran into the woodshed, bringing out some kindlings. "We've got to fill the wood box, Dave," he said, to make talk and divert David's mind; and he crammed the wood in after the paper, till there wasn't much room left.

"You ought not to do it, Joe. O dear me, do stop," implored David, clasping his hands.

"I'm big enough," declared Joel, strutting around and pulling at the things that Polly said were dampers — though why they should be damp, when there was a fire in the stove every day, he never could see. "And when Polly sees that I can make it as good's she can, she'll let me do it every day. Yes, sir-*ree!*" With that he drew the match, and held it to an end of the paper, sticking up. And forgetting to

put back the cover, he raced off to the wood shed again for another armful of kindling.

"*Joel!*" screamed David, left behind in the kitchen. "Come! Oh, we're afire! We're afire!"

Joel dropped his kindlings and the heavier pieces of wood he had gathered up, and went like a shot back to the stove again. Great tongues of flame were shooting up toward the dingy ceiling.

"Why didn't you put the cover on?" cried he, terribly frightened, for he began to think, after all, perhaps it would be quite as well to let Polly make the fire. "It'll be all right, I'll have it on in a minute," suiting the action to the word, as he stuck the lifter into the cover and advanced to the stove.

"Oh, Joe, you'll be burnt up," cried David, in a dreadful voice, and wringing his hands.

Joel made a dash, but the flames swirled out at him, so he backed off.

"You can't do it," screamed Davie; "don't try it, Joe, you'll be all burnt up."

When Davie said that he couldn't do it, Joel made up his mind that he would. Besides, the very thought of the little brown house taking

fire turned him desperate with fright; so he made a second dash, and somehow, he never could tell what made it, the cover slid on, and the flames muttered away to themselves inside, in a smothered kind of way, and there they were, shut up as tight as could be.

"'Twas just as easy as nothing," said Joel, drawing a long breath, and beginning to strut up and down, still carrying the cover-lifter. "You're such a 'fraid-cat, Dave," he added scornfully.

David was beyond caring whether or no he was called a 'fraid-cat, being stiff with fright, so Joel strutted away to his heart's content. "Now I must put in more wood," he declared, and, twitching off the cover, he crammed the stove as full as it would hold, on top of the blazing mass. Then he wiggled the dampers again, to suit him, paying particular attention to the little one in the pipe, then wiped his grimy hands, in great satisfaction, on his trousers.

"You see 'tisn't anything to make a fire," he observed to David; "an I'm goin' to build it every single day, after this. Polly'll be so s'prised. Now come on, Dave, let's go an'

play," and Joel gave a long and restful stretch.

Little David, seeing the stove behaving so well, gave a sigh of relief, and coming slowly out of his fright, clattered after Joel, and soon they were down back of the house, where they had scooped out the ground, and filling it with water, had made what they called a pond. Here they now began to sail boats made out of bits of paper.

"Hi — there — you!" shouted a harsh voice. Joel and David, absorbed in getting their boats across the pond without running into each other, didn't hear. "*Hi!*" yelled the voice again, "your house is afire!"

Joel lifted his black head and stared. "Come here, you!" screamed a man, jumping out of a wagon in the middle of the road, in front of the little brown house. He was big and red-headed, and he held a whip in his hand. This he shook frantically up toward the roof, screaming, "*Your house is afire!*"

Sure enough. Great volumes of smoke came pouring out of the chimney, which wasn't any too good, and once in a while a tongue of flame would sweep out, licking the sides of the bricks,

"'TWAS JUST AS EASY AS NOTHING,' SAID JOEL"

as much as to say, "You can't shut me up entirely, you see." Oh, how merrily they danced!

"Get a bucket. Step lively, if you want to save your house!" roared the man at Joel, who took one good look at the chimney, then sprang for Mamsie's pail. "Get something, Dave," he screamed, "and bring some water."

Now that the fire had really come, David, strange to say, felt all his fright dropping from him. It was as if Mamsie said, "Save the little brown house, dears," and he rushed on the wings of the wind over down across the lane, and helped himself to Grandma Bascom's big bucket, always standing on a bench beside her kitchen door. And, with it almost full of water, he soon stood by the big red-headed man's side.

"You're a likely-headed pair o' chaps," said the man, as Joel dashed up with his pail, which he hadn't been able to find at once, as Mamsie had put some cloth she was going to bleach into it, and set it in the woodshed. "Now, then, I must climb the roof, an' you two boys must keep a-handin' up th' water as smart as you can."

"Oh, I'm goin' up on the roof," cried Joel, and springing up the gutter-pipe.

"Do ye think ye kin?" asked the man. But Joel was already halfway up. And presently the first pail of water was handed up, and splash it went on the flames, by this time coming out very lively at the chimney-top. But it didn't seem to do any good, only to sizzle and siss, for just as soon as a pailful of water was dashed on, out they popped again, as bright as ever. A boy, coming whistling down the road, stopped suddenly, took one look, and ran like lightning over across the fields on a short cut. "Fire — *fire!*" he screamed, and pretty soon, by dint of jumping stone walls and fences, he got into the street, at the end of which stood Mr. Atkins' grocery store. "Fire — *fire!*" he bawled every step of the way. "Where — where?" cried the people at the store, rushing to the door and craning their necks, as he flew by, intent on getting to the fire-engine house, so as to run back with the men who dragged the machine by the ropes.

"At the Pepperses little brown house," bawled the boy, plunging on.

"Now, Polly," Mr. Atkins was just saying,

when the boy's scream was heard, "you tell your Ma she needn't hurry about these coats. I guess that paper'll cover 'em, if I put another knot in th' string. My land! what's that! —"

"*Fire! Fire!*" the boy was bawling all along the street. "It's the Pepperses little brown house."

Somebody said, "Poor children." Others, "Don't let 'em hear," "Too late!" and various other things.

"Come, Phronsie," said Polly, hoarsely, seizing the little fat hand. Phronsie, who was regarding some very pink and white sticks in a big candy jar on the shelf, tore her gaze away, and followed obediently as Polly pulled her along to the door.

"Oh, Polly, you hurt me," she said in a grieved way.

"Here, I'll take you," cried an old farmer with a long beard that looked like a bunch of hay, and he seized Phronsie and set her in his big wagon. Polly hopped in beside. "Don't be scart. We'll all go down and help," screamed a half dozen voices after her. Rattle — rattle — clang came the fire-engine, the boy who had brought the news having secured one of the most impor-

tant places at one of the long ropes. And away they went, the procession gaining in length and strength at each step, till it seemed as if all Badgertown were on the road and bound for the little brown house.

The big red-headed man had dashed up to the roof by the side of Joel. "You better go down and hand water," he said, "an' bring the axe, we may have to cut away th' ruf." Joel, knowing it was worse than useless to disobey, slid down, and got the axe first, to have it ready — oh, dreadful thought! — to cut the little brown house with; and then the two buckets, as full as they could be lifted, went up, and came down empty. Up and down. Up and down.

"Here come th' folks," yelled the man on the roof. "Now we're all right. Don't you be scart, boys, th' fire-engine's comin'."

None too soon! A little fork of flame was just beginning to pop its head out between the shingles close to the chimney, as if to say, "You really needn't think you are going to keep us shut up." Up clattered the fire-engine with a dreadful noise into the back yard, which suddenly seemed to be full of people of all sizes. Joel, when he saw the firemen on hand, sprang

for the roof again. This time he staggered up with his bucket of water.

"Oh, Joel!" He looked down and saw, as well as he could, for something seemed to be the matter with his eyes, Polly's face. Now that the danger was all over, for of course the fire-engine and all those people would save the little brown house, Polly was the last person whom Joel really wanted to see. And he busied himself in helping to haul up the water-buckets, that now came up pretty lively as the boys filled them and handed them to the firemen.

"You'd better get down," said more than one fireman. The roof now seemed to swarm with them.

"I ain't goin' to," said Joel, obstinately, reaching out for another bucket; "it's our house, so there!"

"Let him alone," said the big red-headed man, "he'll work as smart as any two of ye men. If it hadn't 'a' been for him and that one there," pointing with a grimy thumb to David on the ground, still patiently getting water and handing up his bucket, "we'd 'a' been all burnt up, by this time."

Joel's face got fiery red, all through the smut

and grime. "If it hadn't been for me!" and down went his black head. Would Mamsie and Polly ever, ever forgive him?"

"Oh, Joel," screamed Polly from the ground, looking at him piteously, "do come down, dear!" But he really didn't hear now. It seemed to him if he didn't work to the very last, he could never look Mamsie in the face again, so he was now on the other side of the chimney, where the fire was the hottest.

"It's an even chance, if we save it," Joel heard one of the firemen say; "it's got in between the joints. See!"

"Then we've got to cut just that spot," said the big red-headed man, who, by reason of being on hand first, was considered to be the leader, and he swung his axe over his head. "Crash!" went the little brown roof. At the sound, Polly dragged Phronsie over to David's side.

"Now, then, in with the water lively, boys, and splash her out," cried the big red-headed man, who very much liked being a leader. And thereupon he stopped working, and set the others at it in such a brisk fashion that the water ran down in perfect rivers all over the roof, one or two of the streams soaking through, to drop

into Ben's and Joel's and David's bedroom in the loft.

"It's out! It's out!" bawled some of the firemen on the roof to the men and boys. "You don't need to send up any more water."

"Look behind you!" screamed the boy who had first discovered the fire. He seemed to have eyes in the back of his head, and the firemen, whirling around, saw a little tongue of flame shooting determinedly up. It had run along underneath the shingles and hopped at the first chance it could get. So the buckets of water had to keep on flying up, to come down and be filled. Up and down, up and down, till Polly sank on the grass, unable to bear it another bit longer. "Oh, if I weren't a girl," she moaned passionately, "then I could be up there, and I know I'd save the little brown house. Oh, Mamsie! Mamsie!"

"Don't fret, Polly," said a good woman living in the village, — for by this time a long procession of men, women, and children had hurried in, crowding and jamming into the yard, — "ef it burns down, you shall all come to our house an' stay a spell, till you get another one."

"Don't," cried Polly, passionately, and shrink-

ing off; "we can't live, if the little brown house goes. Oh, Mamsie! Mamsie!" and she sobbed as if her heart would break, and covered her face with her hands.

"Don't cry, Polly," and Phronsie's little hand crept softly up to her neck. But Polly couldn't stop. If there had been anything for her to do, she would have kept up, but to sit there and see the little brown house burn up, and know because she was a girl there was no place for her on the roof — why, there she was, sobbing as if her heart would break, and Phronsie clinging piteously to her neck.

A ringing shout struck upon her ear. "It's coming!" shivered Polly; "the roof's tumbling in!" and she hid her face lower yet. Wouldn't God stop the dreadful fire ever yet. He must, for Mamsie said He loved to help all His children. And —

"Hooray, Polly!" called Joel in her ear, putting a very black face up close to her pale one. "Don't you understand? It's all out. It is, truly, this time, every single squinchin' bit."

But Polly didn't understand, and they laid her back on the grass, and one woman said, "Get a pamleaf fan," and another cried, "Get

th' water in that pail there," pointing to one not used, on the grass. And everybody got in everybody else's way, and crowded around her, and the water was dashed over her face till she was in a little pool of it, and still she didn't open her eyes. And Phronsie wailed and clung to her, getting as wet, so a thin woman remarked, "as a drownded rat," and David was on the other side, nearly as bad. As for Joel, he rushed up and down, completely gone with fright. After all his brave fight, to have Polly give out was something so very dreadful he couldn't think of it.

"Here comes Mrs. Pepper," said somebody, and, "Thank the Lord," said another, and down the road in the doctor's gig, the little doctor driving like mad, came Mamsie. They helped her out, and she was in the yard, never looking at the little brown house; for her black eyes were searching among the crowd, and her white lips tried to frame some words.

"All safe, Marm," sang out the big red-headed man; "and you've got some smart chaps," thinking he'd give all the comfort, and at once, that was in his power.

"Polly ain't just well," spoke up somebody,

sympathetically, and in a minute Mamsie was down on the grass, with Polly's head in her lap, the other children swarming around her, and Dr. Fisher in the midst.

"Oh, I'm so ashamed," gasped Polly, coming to, and hiding her face on Mrs. Pepper's breast.

"Don't you feel badly, Polly child," said Mamsie, smoothing her brown hair gently; "you're all tired out. The little brown house is all safe — just think of that!"

Polly thrust up her head and took one look. "Mamsie," she whispered, holding to Mrs. Pepper's neck convulsively, "God did stop the dreadful fire, didn't He?"

"He surely did," said Mrs. Pepper, looking around on all her little group. The neighbors and townspeople, the firemen and the crowd, stole silently off and left them there, but Dr. Fisher stayed.

Suddenly Joel was missing. "Where is he?" asked Mrs. Pepper, a fresh alarm gathering on her face.

"P'r'aps he's gone with the engine," piped up the boy who had discovered the fire, and who seemed to think it his duty to watch that it didn't break out again.

"Oh, no, Joel wouldn't do that," said Mrs. Pepper.

"I'll find him," said little Dr. Fisher, who had his own views about Joel, after closely regarding his singed eyebrows and black face; "lucky enough if he doesn't need considerable patching up," he muttered to himself, as he strode off to reconnoitre.

"There's no use in your hiding," he said aloud, as if talking to some one. "So you might as well come out at once, and let me know where you're hurt, Joe, and I'll fix you before your mother sees you."

"I ain't hurt," said a voice from the lilac bushes.

"Oh, you are not?" said the little doctor, opening the bushes to peer within, his spectacles setting well down on the end of his nose, so that he looked over them. "That's good," and he soon had Joel out. "Now then, I'll fix you up as good as ever," and he rummaged his ample pockets for the things he had thrust into them for this very work.

"I ain't hurt," said Joel, wriggling furiously.

"Stand still, Joe," said the little doctor, coolly, "for I'm going to patch you up, so that you're

decent to see your mother. Aren't you ashamed to get this way when Polly, poor brave girl, has been so sick? Why, what's the matter with you!" suddenly giving Joel a whirl, so that he could look in his face.

Joel's face was working frightfully. "I 'most — burnt — the little brown house — up," he gasped. "I made a fire in — the stove!"

XXV

JOEL SELLS SHOES FOR MR. BEEBE

THE little doctor kept a firm hold on Joel's jacket, and gazed keenly into his face. "Um!" he said.

"I wanted — to — to — help Polly," gasped Joel. "O dear me!" He was a sight to behold, as the tears washed their way down the grimy face, which was still working fearfully, as he tried to hold in his sobs.

"So you thought you'd help Polly," said Dr. Fisher, kindly; "was that it, Joel?"

"Yes," said Joel; "she'd put the putty in, and put it in — and — "

"Put the putty in?" repeated the little doctor, aghast.

"Yes, or Ben had."

"I never in all my life heard of burning putty in a stove," said Dr. Fisher, helplessly, and setting his big spectacles again, as if that might possibly assist him to understand.

"Oh, she didn't burn it," cried Joel, just as much astonished.

"Well, what did she do with it, then?" demanded Dr. Fisher. "Dear me, I always supposed a stove was meant to burn things in," and he waved his head helplessly, and regarded Joel with a fixed stare.

"She stuck the putty in the holes," said Joel, very distinctly; "don't you understand? Polly's stove is very old, and it's cracked, and she says the air comes in and then the fire goes down, so she has to stuff up all the mean old cracks. O dear me, I wanted to help her," and off Joel went in another gust of tears.

"I suppose Polly feels badly over her stove, sometimes," reflected Dr. Fisher, casting a very sharp glance on Joel. "I really wonder if she does," he added carelessly.

"Feels badly!" exploded Joel. Then he took a good long look around on all sides, and leaned over to whisper in the little doctor's ear, "*She cries sometimes, Polly does.*"

"No!" exclaimed Dr. Fisher.

"Yes, she does," declared Joel, shaking his stubby head decidedly. "She cries dreadfully when Mamsie isn't looking. And she didn't

know that I saw her, either, only I peeked behind the pantry door. And I wanted to — to — help her." He began to cry afresh at the recollection.

"Joel," said Dr. Fisher, getting up suddenly, "you've got to tell your mother how the little brown house got on fire."

"I know it," said Joel, but his head drooped, and his eyes fell.

"And the best way to right the wrong is to own up at once," said the little doctor. "I suppose she's taught you that, eh, Joel?"

"Yes, sir," said Joel.

"Well, when you've got such a mother as you have, Joel," continued Dr. Fisher, "you better treat her as well as you know how. So run along, and be quick with you," and Dr. Fisher gave him a resounding clap on the shoulder, that sent Joe flying off like a shot from a gun, while the little doctor stole off the back way, and got into his gig, and drove off as fast as he could, and thus escaped being thanked.

And the Badgertown folks got together and held a meeting in Mr. Atkins' store that very evening, and said that it was a pity that Mrs. Pepper, who was struggling so to bring up

all those five children, should have such a hard time. So each man put his hand in his pocket and fished out some money; and the carpenters came next day and mended up all the holes where the axe had cut through the roof; and the whole house was cleaned and dried where the water had run down, and then there was one dollar and forty-five cents left over, for people had been so very generous.

"Just keep it, Mrs. Pepper," said the spokesman, "'twill come in handy, most likely;" and Mrs. Pepper couldn't speak, she was so taken aback. But they didn't seem to feel as if they hadn't been thanked enough, as they all went back again into the village.

Ben had been working in a distant wood-lot for Deacon Blodgett, and so hadn't heard a word of the fire until he got into the village, on his way home. Then he said he wouldn't believe it, unless he should see for himself. So he ran every step of the way home, and rushed in all out of breath. "What's happened?" he demanded of the first person he met. This happened to be Polly.

"Oh, Ben!" she exclaimed, flinging her arms around him. And then followed all the story.

And Ben continued to blink every now and then up at the ceiling, varied by hurrying out to gaze at the roof, when he would rub his eyes. "Dear me, Polly!" he would exclaim, "it seems just like an awful dream."

"I wish it was," sighed Polly, "and I guess Joel wishes so, too."

But the next day, when the Badgertown people came with their gift, then the five little Peppers changed about to the very happiest children in the world! And as soon as the visitors had gone, the whole bunch of Peppers just took hold of hands, and danced like wild little things around the table where the pile of silver quarters and ten cent pieces lay.

"Mamsie," said Polly, when at last they stopped to take breath, "did you ever know of such good people in the world as our Badgertown folks?"

"I'm sure I didn't," declared Mrs. Pepper, wiping her eyes. "May the Lord reward them, for I'm sure I can't."

Polly suddenly left the ring of Peppers, and came close to her mother. "Perhaps you can, sometime, Mamsie," she said soberly.

"I hope so," replied Mother Pepper. "Well,

we'll look forward to it, and take the chance, if it ever comes, you may be sure, Polly."

That night, when the little brown house was as still as a mouse, Polly heard a loud scream come pealing down from the room in the loft. Mrs. Pepper, strange to say, didn't hear it at all; poor woman, she was very tired with her work, from which she had been hurried so unceremoniously when the alarm of fire reached her, and she had lain awake all the first part of the night with a heart burdened with anxious care.

"Joel's dreaming all about the fire, most likely," said Polly to herself. So she slipped on Mamsie's old wrapper, picking it up so that she would not trip and tumble on her nose, as she sped softly over the stairs.

"Joel, hush!" she said reprovingly, "you'll wake Mamsie and Phronsie! Ben, do make him keep still!"

"I can't," said Ben, only half awake. "Hush up there, Joe!" and he turned over a very sleepy face, and tried to look at Polly.

"'Tisn't me," said Joel, in high dudgeon; "I ain't a 'fraid-cat." And Polly stared to see David sitting on the edge of the bed he shared

with Joel, and tucking up his feet well under him, while he shook with terror as he cried shrilly, "They're running all up my legs!"

"Poor little thing!" exclaimed Polly, sitting down on the other edge of the bed, at the risk of getting on Joel's toes. "He's frightened," to the others. "I s'pose you've been dreaming, Davie."

"No, no!" cried Davie, huddling up worse than ever. "There goes one of 'em now!" he exclaimed suddenly, and pointed toward Polly; "he's just running under Mamsie's wrapper!"

Polly hopped off the bed in her liveliest fashion, while from under Mamsie's wrapper scuttled a black object over the bedquilt in the opposite direction. "What is it?" she cried, beginning to shake violently herself; "O dear me! are there any more of them?"

"Yes," said Davie, "there are lots and lots, Polly. O dear me!" He couldn't twist himself into a smaller knot than he was, so there he sat, as miserable as possible, with the tears rolling down his face.

"Joel!" cried Polly, giving that individual a little poke in the back, as he appeared to be going off to sleep again, "you can tell about

these black things! I must know; so what is it?"

"Let me go to sleep," grunted Joel, twisting away from her fingers.

"No," said Polly, firmly, "I shan't, Joey Pepper. What are those black things that Davie — O dear me, there is another one!" and Polly hopped back upon the bed, for there was a second black creature steering straight for her in the dim light.

Joel gave a long restful sigh. "Do let me alone," he said crossly. But Polly leaned over and shook his shoulder smartly.

"See here, now," cried Ben, roused by all this, "you just sit up in bed, Mister Joel, and tell Polly all you know about this business. Do you hear?" And suddenly over came Ben's pillow flying through the air, to tumble over Joel's chubby nose.

"Nothin' to tell," declared Joel, again; but he sat up in bed.

"So you said before," said Polly; "but these black things got up here somehow, and you know all about it, I'm sure. So you've just got to tell all about it, Joel Pepper."

"It's crickets!" blurted Joel, suddenly, "an'

Dave an' me brought 'em to put in Ben's bed, an' —"

"Thank you," interrupted Ben, and, "Oh, Davie," reprovingly said Polly.

"I'm sorry," said little Davie, wriggling up his toes; "I didn't know they hopped so bad. Oh, Polly, they're all running up my legs," he cried with another burst.

"Never mind," said Polly, quite reassured, "they're nothing but dear, nice little crickets. I don't care, now; but it's dreadful to see black things in the middle of the night, when you don't know what they are."

"I don't like 'em, Polly," wailed David. "I'd rather they'd be out of doors."

"But you helped to bring 'em in," said Polly. "How could you, Davie?" she added reproachfully.

"Dave didn't 'xactly help," said Joel, uneasily. "I told him he'd got to, Polly," he added honestly.

"Oh, I see," said Polly. "Well, now, Davie, you're going downstairs to get into Mamsie's bed."

"Oh, goody!" cried Davie, smiling through his tears; and stepping gingerly out of bed on

the tips of his toes, lest he should meet a black cricket unawares, he skipped to the head of the stairs.

"Shake your clothes," called Polly, in a smothered voice, fearful lest Mamsie and Phronsie should wake up. Thereupon she began to shake the old wrapper violently. "We mustn't carry any of 'em downstairs," she said, while Joel set up a howl.

"Oh, I don't want Dave to go downstairs and leave me," he whined.

"Yes, you can stay up here with your crickets," said Polly, coolly, having shaken off any possibility of one remaining on Mamsie's wrapper.

"And to-morrow morning you just step around lively and pick 'em all up and carry 'em out doors," said Ben, before turning over for another nap. "Good night, Polly."

"Good night, Ben," said Polly, softly, going downstairs after Davie, who was pattering ahead, "and good night, Joey."

"Good night," snivelled Joel. "O dear me, I don't want Dave to go. Well, anyway, he ain't goin' away ever again, Polly Pepper — so there!"

The next morning, as soon as it was light enough to see them, Joel picked up all his crickets. It was no easy matter, for they made him an awful piece of work, hopping and jumping into all the corners; and, just as soon as his thumb and fingers were on them — away they were off again. But Ben had said every one must go. So at it Joel kept, until the perspiration just rolled from his tired, hot face.

"I don't like 'em, Polly," he confided, when the last one was escorted out of doors, "and I ain't ever goin' to bring one in again."

"I wouldn't, Joe," said Polly, "and it isn't nice to scare folks, I think."

"I think so, too," said Phronsie, with a wise nod of her yellow head, as she sat on the floor, playing with David.

"Think what, Phronsie?" cried Joel, suddenly.

"What Polly said," replied Phronsie, patting Seraphina, who was being shown the pictures in a bit of old newspaper that David was pretending to read.

"Hoh! Hoh!" cried Joel, bursting into a laugh. "You don't know whatever you're talking about, Phron. Does she, Polly?"

"Don't tease her," said Polly; but Phronsie didn't hear, being absorbed in correcting Seraphina, who had wobbled over on her back instead of sitting up elegantly to view the pictures.

Joel ran down the next day to see Mrs. Beebe, Mother Pepper giving the long-desired permission. Davie had a little sore throat, and he much preferred to stay near Mamsie's chair.

"Now, Joe, remember to be good," warned Mother Pepper, the last thing, when he had been washed and dressed and brushed and declared quite prepared.

"I'm going to be always good," declared Joel. "I ain't ever going to be like Ab'm," he added in disgust.

"Joel," reproved Mrs. Pepper, sternly, "don't judge other folks; it's enough for you to do to look out for yourself."

Joel hung his head, abashed.

"Well, good-by," said Mrs. Pepper, the stern lines on her face breaking into a smile.

"Good-by, Mamsie!" Joel flew back suddenly, to throw his arms around her neck, then he rushed up to do the same thing to Polly, and then to Phronsie.

"Don't kiss David," said his mother, "'cause you may take his throat."

"Then I want to kiss him," cried Joel. "Mayn't I, Mammy?" he wheedled. "I don't want Dave to have it."

"Oh, he'd have it just as much," said Mrs. Pepper, sewing away for dear life.

"How could he?" cried Joel, in great astonishment, and standing quite still. "Say, Mammy, how could he, if I took it?"

"You'd find if you took it there'd be quite enough sore throat for two," answered Mrs. Pepper. "Well, run along, Joe, you wouldn't understand, and 'tisn't necessary that you should; only you are to do as I say, that's all."

So Joel ran off, waving a good-by to David; and since he was not allowed to kiss him, he gave a rousing "Hooray," which delighted little Davie greatly, as he stood, his face pressed to the window, to see him go.

Once within Mrs. Beebe's home, it was enchantment enough. It was a good afternoon for the shoe business, Mr. Beebe having two customers. One of them was a very fussy woman who had a small boy in charge. Joel was in high glee at being called upon to help

lift down ever so many boxes, until pretty near every shoe in the stock was tried on. Mrs. Beebe kept coming out of the little parlor at the back of the shop, and saying, "Ain't you through with Joel yet, Pa?" all of which made Joel feel very important, indeed, and almost decided him to keep a shoe shop, when he grew up, instead of being a stage-coach driver.

"No," said Mr. Beebe, shortly, "I ain't through with him, Ma. He's a master hand at getting them boxes down."

"Hain't you got a pair a little mite broader across the toes?" asked the woman. "Stand up and stamp in 'em, Johnny." So Johnny stood up and stamped in the new shoes.

"Real hard," said his mother. So he stamped real hard.

"I'd druther have another pair a mite broader," said the woman, discontentedly.

"I showed you some broader ones," said old Mr. Beebe. "Well, Joel, my boy, you'll have to climb up and hand down that box up in the corner. P'r'aps some of those will suit."

So Joel, who wished he could be there every day in the year, and that that woman would

all the time bring in boys who wanted different shoes from any that Mr. Beebe had, climbed up like a squirrel and brought the box to Mr. Beebe.

"Now, Marm," said the shoe-store keeper, deftly whipping a good roomy pair, "I guess these are about what you want," and he laughed cheerily.

"No, they ain't either," said Johnny's mother, snappishly taking them, and viewing them critically, "they're big as all out doors, Mr. Beebe."

"Well, he wants 'em to wear out o' doors, don't he?" said Mr. Beebe, "so I guess they'll suit, at last."

"Well, they won't," said the woman, "an' you needn't try 'em on, Johnny. They're a sight bigger'n they orter be. I guess I can tell soon's I see a shoe."

"Can't Joel come now, Pa?" asked old Mrs. Beebe, presenting her cap-border in the doorway again. It was quite fine, with new pink ribbons which she had put on because she had company.

"Yes, pretty soon, Ma," replied her husband, quite worn out. "Well, I'm sure I'm sorry I can't suit you, Marm," turning to the woman,

"but I honestly can't, for I've shown you every shoe in my shop. Here, Joel, we'll begin and pack 'em up again," he said, sorting the pairs out from the pile on the counter that ran across the side of the shop, and slinging them by the string that tied them together, over his arm.

"I'll see that pair," said the woman, suddenly, touching one as it dangled over Mr. Beebe's arm.

"All right, Marm," said Mr. Beebe, most obligingly. So he knelt down before Johnny again, and pulled on the shoes, and Johnny's mother told the boy to stand up and stamp in 'em, all of which was performed, and old Mr. Beebe got up and pulled out his bandanna and wiped his hot face.

"Now that's somethin' like," said the woman, with a bob of her head, while her little eyes twinkled. "I guess I know the right shoe, as well as the next one. Why didn't you show 'em to me before?" she snapped.

"You've had them shoes on twice before," said Mr. Beebe, "or at least the boy has, and first they were too broad, and then they were too narrer."

"Well, I'll take 'em, anyway, now," said the

woman, laying down the money, "and I guess I know, as well as the next one, whether my boy's tried on shoes or not."

"Now, Joel," said old Mr. Beebe, when the little green door with its jangling bell had really closed on her and on Johnny, "as soon as we get these shoes back again in the boxes, you better run into th' parler, 'cause Ma's been a-waitin' considerable."

Joel, much divided in his mind whether he would rather stay in the shop altogether, with the delightful shoes, or go out and spend half of the time with Mrs. Beebe and the doughnuts and pink and white sticks he felt almost sure were waiting for him, came to the conclusion that he really couldn't decide which was the more delightful; and then the shop-door bell jangled again, and there was another customer.

This time it was a little thin old man, and although he came from another town, he seemed to be a great friend of Mr. Beebe's, who now joyfully welcomed him.

"Well, I declare, if 'tain't Obadiah Andrews!" exclaimed the shoe-shop keeper, radiantly, taking a good look at the newcomer. "I haven't seen you for a week o' Sundays, Obadiah."

"Nor I hain't seen you," declared the little man, just as well pleased, and sitting down gladly. "I'm most beat out, a-gittin' here, so I want some new shoes, Jotham, and I cal'late I'll get 'em about as nice as they make 'em here."

"I cal'late so, too, Obadiah," said old Mr. Beebe, rubbing his hands together in a pleased way. "Now, Joel, we'll get down all the shoes on this side," and he ambled across the shop, "an' you can put up the boys' sizes, afterwards, if you want to."

"Pa, ain't you most through with Joel? Oh, why, here's Mr. Andrews!" exclaimed Mrs. Beebe. Then she came into the little shop and sat down, while Mr. Beebe and Joel got out the shoes that were to be tried on. "It's so nice that I can pass the time o' day with you, meanwhilst," she observed.

But it didn't take very long to satisfy old Mr. Andrews. As soon as the first shoe was pulled on he declared it was just right, although the shoe-shop keeper offered to try on the others.

"P'r'aps these'll pinch when you get home," suggested Mr. Beebe, anxiously, "or somethin' else as bad will be the matter with 'em." But

the little old man said, "No; do 'em up, Jotham."

So the shoes were rolled in paper, and tied with a red string, and then Mr. Obadiah Andrews said, "Now I'm a-goin' to set an' visit, and pass the time o' day with you, Jotham."

"So do," cried old Mr. Beebe, delightedly, counting out the change. "Now, Joel, you can pile all them shoes back, and then finish the boys' sizes, if you want to; and after that, Ma, he can go into the parlor, and be company to you."

When Mrs. Beebe and Joel finally got into the parlor, leaving the two old friends talking busily, there only remained ten minutes before it was time to go home.

"O dear me!" exclaimed old Mrs. Beebe, quite aghast, as she glanced at the clock. "Well, you must obey your Ma, and the only thing I see out of it is, you must come again." So she stuffed into a paper bag all the pink and white sticks and doughnuts that were piled so nicely, in a company fashion, on a blue plate. "There," she said, smothering her disappointment as best she could, "take these home with you, and tell your Ma I expect you again, some

day. We can't help it, 'cause Pa's been so busy," as Joel ran off.

"I've sold shoes all the afternoon," he screamed, rushing into the little brown house, and for a moment forgetting the paper bag and its precious contents. Then it came over him in a burst. "Look at this!" swinging it over Polly's brown head. She bobbed it up suddenly. "Look out!" screamed Joel, but too late; Polly's brown head bumped into the bag, and away it spun, and the doughnuts and pink and white sticks went flying all over the kitchen floor.

"Now, that's too bad," cried Polly, jumping up to help pick them up. "Oh, Joel, what a perfectly splendid lot!"

"Ain't it!" said Joel, his mouth watering to begin on them. "Here's one more," spying a pink stick behind Mamsie's chair. "Here 'tis. I've got it!" emerging in triumph, and holding it fast. "Where's Phronsie and Dave?"

"Over at Grandma's," said Polly.

"O dear!" began Joel, then he thought a minute. "I'm going to take Grandma a doughnut, Polly," he cried, dancing off, and swinging the bag, into which he had crammed all the "goodies."

He heard Phronsie singing to Grandma, which she was very fond of doing, and perched up on the side of the bed, Grandma smiling away, as well pleased as though she heard every word.

"Dave," screamed Joel, bounding in, and swinging the bag, "you don't know what I've got," and he hopped up on the bed between Grandma and Phronsie.

When Davie saw that, he got out of his chair and speedily hopped up on the bed, too. Grandma laughed till the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I guess you'll laugh more yet, Grandma," declared Joel, untwisting the top of his bag, and bringing a pair of bright black eyes very close to it to peer within. "It's perfectly splendid!" he cried, holding his hands so no one else could see.

"Oh, Joey, do show us!" cried Phronsie, getting up to kneel on the patched bedquilt, to look over his arm.

"You may take one peek," decided Joel, suddenly, bringing his eyes away from the mouth of the bag to gaze at them. "Grandma must have the first one; then you must guess what it is."

"I guess it's doughnuts," said little Davie, "'cause you've been to Mrs. Beebe's, and besides, I smell 'em." Grandma smiled all the time, just as happily as if she had heard everything that had been said.

"There's something else," said Joel, emphatically, "but 'tisn't your guess. Now, Grandma," he held the bag close up to the old lady's cap-border, "look!"

"My!" exclaimed the old lady. "What you got, Joel?" as he twitched away the bag.

"Didn't you see?" cried Joel; "well, you may have one more peek, 'cause you are Grandma," and he brought it up again before her eyes.

"Doughnuts?" said Grandma. "My sakes! where'd you get 'em?"

"You may have one," said Joel, peering into the depths of the bag to fish out a good-sized one, that was sugary all over, which he dropped in her hands.

"Give me one," begged Phronsie, holding out both hands.

"In a minute," said Joel. "Now, Grandma, what else is in here?" giving the bag a shake.

"Hey?" asked Grandma; "speak louder, Joel."

"O dear me! I can't speak so's she'll hear," said Joel, in despair, to the others. So he shook the bag again, when the bottom of it came out, and away the doughnuts and pink and white sticks flew, and rolled all over the patched bed-quilt.

"There, now," said Joel, in disgust; "there isn't any use in anybody's guessing anything. But we can eat 'em now," he added, brightening.

XXVI

MISS PARROTT'S COACH AND THE COASTING

IT was snowing tiny flakes when Joel's eyes popped open, and the small, feathery things whirled against the little paned window, as if they would very much like to come in.

"Dave — Dave!" cried Joel, poking him, "get up — it's snowing!"

David's eyes flew quite wide at that, and he sat up at once. "Oh, Joel," he squealed, as he watched the flakes, "ain't they pretty!"

"Um! I guess so," said Joel, springing into his clothes; "they're nice for snowballs and to slide on, anyway."

David reached over for one blue woollen stocking on the floor by the side of the bed, and sat quite still with it in his hand, regarding the snowy whirl.

"You ain't got dressed a bit," cried Joel, spinning around, "and I'm all ready."

"So will I be all ready," cried little David,

pulling on the stocking with all haste, and flying at the rest of his clothes with alacrity. "Wait, Joe — do," as Joel began to clatter downstairs.

"Can't," said Joel, racing off, "I'm going to get the sled."

"Wa-it," called Davie, half crying.

But Joel was in the woodshed, hauling out the precious sled that Ben had made for the boys out of some boards and old sleigh runners that had been given him. He was dragging it out with a dreadful noise from the corner where it had stayed all summer, when Polly came running out.

"I don't believe it's going to snow much," she said, squinting at the feathery specks. "You won't want your sled to-day, boys."

"I'm goin' to have it ready," said Joel, with another pull.

"Well, I'll help you," said Polly, taking hold of one end. "Dear me, I do think this is the most splendid sled in all the world," she exclaimed enthusiastically. "I don't see how Ben could make it so nice."

"Ben can do anything," declared Joel, tugging away.

"I know it," said Polly, with pride. "Well, I wish he had time to go coasting all he wants to," she added sorrowfully.

"Maybe he will have, this winter," suggested Joel, who never could bear to see Polly sad.

"P'r'aps," said Polly; "but there's always wood to chop in the winter, Joe. There — here it comes!" as the big sled tumbled out with a rush, to be dragged into the middle of the woodshed floor.

David now came running downstairs, and Phronsie, hearing that the sled was to be drawn out, pattered into the woodshed, too. "Oh, Polly," she cried in rapture, "now I'm going out to ride on it this very minute," and she danced round and round, clapping her hands in glee.

"O dear me!" cried Polly, pointing out of the little low window. "See, Phronsie, there's only the leastest little bit of snow. Why, I do verily b'lieve it's going to stop."

At this dreadful suggestion, every one of the little Peppers in the woodshed rushed to the window, and Joel flung wide the door, so that a cold blast, carrying a feathery cloud of little flakes, swept in.

"Oh, Joel!" exclaimed Polly, "shut the door, Phronsie'll catch cold." Joel was already out in the house-place, dancing about, declaring it was going to be awful deep, and they could make a snow man soon, he guessed; so little Davie ran and pushed to the door, shutting off all chance of hearing the rest of what he was saying. He was gone some time, and the others ran into the kitchen, for Polly declared they would get no breakfast that day if she did not hurry up, and David and Phronsie thought it much nicer to watch the snowstorm from those windows than from the little tucked-up window in the woodshed. The consequence was that Joel ran in just as they had begun breakfast, in a fine glow, his cheeks very red, and his chubby nose as well. "Why didn't you come?" he demanded, with sparkling eyes.

"Where?" cried Polly. "Oh, Joe, what have you been doing? Your face is as red as fire."

"And your nose is red, too," said David.

"I don't care," said Joel, slipping into his seat. "Give me some mush, Polly, do!" he begged hungrily, passing his bowl. "Oh, 'twas just prime, I tell you!"

"What?" asked Polly, quickly. "You keep

saying it's fine, and don't tell us what you've been doing. That isn't polite," she added, for Polly was quite particular as to her manners, and liked to be very genteel before the other children.

"Oh, I've been riding in Miss Parrott's coach," said Joel, trying to appear as if this were an everyday occurrence, and eating on as if nothing had happened. Miss Parrott lived in an old ancestral house, about two miles from Badgertown. She was very rich, but kept entirely to herself, and drove about in an ancient coach, the envy of all the villagers. "And I called you all to come, and you wouldn't."

"Oh, Joel Pepper!" cried Polly, greatly shocked to think of the splendid chance they all had missed, and dropping the big spoon with which she was serving the mush, "you never called us one single bit!"

"No, you never did!" added David, solemnly, and looking at Polly with all his eyes.

"Never did!" echoed Phronsie, shaking her yellow head positively. "Polly, I want some more mush, I do."

"Yes, I did, too," spoke up Joel, loudly.

"Joel!" reproved Mother Pepper.

"Well, I did, Mamsie," repeated Joel, in a very injured tone. "I called just like this, 'come quick! and ride in Miss Parrott's coach;' so there!"

"O dear me!" cried Polly, passionately, sitting back in her chair, "I'd rather have gone in that coach than have done anything else, and now you've been, and we never'll get a chance again. Never in all this world!"

"How did it happen, Joel?" asked Ben. "Do tell the whole story from the beginning."

"Why, you see it was this way," began Joel. "Polly, give me some more mush, do," passing his bowl.

"O dear me, do tell first, Joe," cried Polly, impatiently. "I don't know where the spoon is," for the big spoon had tumbled off to the floor, and she hadn't seen it go in the excitement.

"Joel, get a clean one," said Mrs. Pepper, "and then pick up the other; it's likely it fell down."

So Joel hopped out of his chair and got a clean spoon for Polly, and then dived under the table and came back with the other spoon. "Now begin and tell us all about it," said his

mother. "No, Polly, you needn't help him the mush till he's told."

So Joel, seeing he wasn't to get the mush until the whole story how he got his ride in the Parrott coach was related, began at once, and rattled it off as fast as he could. "The — man — that — drives — it — stopped — an' — I — was — in — th' — yard — an' — he — said — don't — you — wanter — all — hands — o' — you children — to drive — I've — got — to drive a — piece — down th' — road — an' I — called — and — called — you — an' — we — went — an' — that's all. Now give me some mush!"

"If we only had known!" mourned Polly, clasping her hands. "Is it lined with green satin, Joel?" she asked suddenly.

"I don't understand," said Mrs. Pepper, in a puzzled way. "Where were you, Joel, when Miss Parrott's man asked you? And you didn't go bareheaded, and without your coat?"

"Out in the yard, Mamsie," answered Joel. "Polly, do give me some mush," for Polly was so absorbed waiting to hear if Miss Parrott's coach was really lined with green satin, that she had forgotten all about Joe and his breakfast. So now she hastily dipped out the mush into the

bowl that was waiting for it. "Is it really lined with green satin, Joel?" she cried breathlessly.

"I don't know," said Joel, all his attention upon his bowl of mush.

"I most know it is," said Polly, leaning her elbows on the table, and her head upon her hands, to think how it would really seem to be riding in a coach lined with green satin.

"And now I never shall go," she ended.

"Why didn't you come back for us?" asked David, suddenly. He hadn't eaten anything since Joel had rushed in with the wonderful story, and between Polly's disappointment and his own, was in a great state of distress.

"Oh, I thought you were coming right off," said Joel, swallowing rapid mouthfuls; "and then, when I got into the coach, the man that drives Miss Parrott said he couldn't wait no longer."

"Any longer, you mean," corrected Mrs. Pepper.

"Yes'm," said Joel; "and then we drove off."

"You see, we had to shut the door to the woodshed," said Polly, "'cause Phronsie would catch cold if we didn't, and we didn't hear a sin-

gle word when you called, Joel Pepper; not a single one!"

"Where'd you go?" asked David, suddenly.

"Oh, down to the Centre," said Joel, "to two — no, I guess four stores, and then he brought me home — that is, almost home. He dropped me at the corner."

"O dear me!" exclaimed Polly.

"Oh, jolly! look at the snow!" screamed Joel, flying out of his chair. And sure enough, while they had been so engrossed, there it had been coming down faster and faster, until it was a powdery veil, almost too thick to see through.

So somewhere in the middle of the morning, Joel and David started off with their sled, drawing on their mittens with the greatest satisfaction, and bobbing good-by to the others watching them from the windows.

All went well, until Joe proposed that they should go to Simon's Hill, a long steep thoroughfare some two miles distant, that swung at the bottom very abruptly into the turnpike. And trudging off there, they climbed it with despatch, and began to coast down.

"Oh, whickets!" cried Joel, who was steering,

"GEE-HAW-GEE-HAW-WHEE-DIMP-DUMP"

little Davie hanging on behind, more than three-quarters afraid, though he wouldn't let Joel see it for all the world. "Gee-haw-gee-haw-whee-dimp-dump," as they flew over the rises, bumping and twisting from side to side.

"Oh, take care, Joe," screamed David, in terror, "we most went over," for on one side the road ran down abruptly into a thicket of evergreen and scrub oaks.

"Hoh, we're going straight!" sang out Joel, "you're always such a 'fraid-cat, David Pepper."

"I ain't a 'fraid-cat," protested Davie, "and I want to go home to mother."

"Well, you are going down again, eleven, no, I guess sixty times," declared Joel, "after this. Gee-whiz-bump-bump-bang!" This last was brought out of him by a sudden slewing to the side, where the slope ran off to the evergreen, scrub oak thicket; but Joel missed the edge by about an inch, so he screamed with delight, and whizzed safely down the rest of the hill.

"I ain't going down ever again," said David, "not once, Joel," as they flew along and the cold air swept his pale cheeks.

Just then, along the turnpike toward the abrupt turn of the hill-road, was coming an ox-

pung, loaded with wood, and driven by old Farmer Seeley, who was almost as blind as a bat and deaf as a post.

"Hi!" screamed Joel, whizzing along. "See us come down," but Farmer Seeley neither saw nor heard, and just then he concluded to steer his team up as near as possible to the hill-road. Joel saw this, and yelled, but he might as well have screamed to the hill. It was all done in a moment. Down flew the clumsy home-made sled, that couldn't be turned in a second; Joel frantically steering to get past the big awkward team, that was blocking up the way, David clinging to him in a dumb helpless terror. Z-z-rr-thud! and the first thing that old Farmer Seeley knew, four small arms and legs were waving frantically in the air, and thrown suddenly, with a mixture of boards and runners, against the ox-team of wood, with an awful crash; and then all was still.

"Land o' Goshen!" ejaculated Farmer Seeley, at the crash. "What's that 'ere? O my gracious Peters!" as he saw what it was as well as he was able, for his poor eyes. And getting off from the team he went to the spot, shaking so in every limb, that he could hardly walk.

There was no sound beneath the upturned sled, where it lay just as it had been thrown against the wood-pung, and for one dreadful moment Farmer Seeley thought the two boys to whom the small legs and arms belonged were dead, and he shook so his false teeth rattled in his head, and he sat right down in the snow.

"I must dig 'em out," he said to himself in a cold fright, "for they've druv their heads clean into the snow, and they may get stuffocated, if they ain't already dead."

So he did the best he could in that work, proceeding only a little way, when Joel bounced up suddenly, shook his black hair, and rubbed his eyes. "Oh, I remember," he said.

"Now, see here — you boy," screamed old Farmer Seeley, angrily, "I'll have you took up, whoever ye be, a-runnin' into my ox-team, an' a-buntin' into my wood. Um — I will!"

"Get Dave out," cried Joel, who cared very little for whatever the old man might say, and pawing the snow wildly. "Help me get Dave out."

"I can't help none," said the old man, queru-

lously. "I'm stiff in th' jints, an' beside, you've scart me to death, eenamost."

"Oh — oh!" screamed Joel, in a frightful panic. "Dave — get up, Dave!"

But David lay like a little log of wood, as still as those on the old pung.

XXVII

PRINCES AND PRINCESSES

"POLLY," said Mrs. Pepper, "don't worry any more about the boys not coming home; just keep the potatoes hot in the oven." For Polly had run to the window about a dozen times, wondering where they could be, and why they didn't come back for dinner.

"They are having a nice time, somewhere, bless their hearts," said Mrs. Pepper, with a smile. "I'm so glad the snow has come early, for they've been longing for it so much." She hadn't felt so happy and contented for a good while, for besides rejoicing in her boys' pleasure, Mr. Atkins had given her this very morning an order to knit as many mittens as she could, and she even caught herself humming a little tune.

Polly heard her, and ran over to her side. "Oh, Mamsie Pepper!" she exclaimed, "do sing it," and she threw her arms around her neck.

"I can't sing now," said Mother Pepper, a little flush coming on her cheek, "and besides, I don't need to, with you, Polly," and she smiled fondly on her.

"I'll stop, Mamsie — if you'll only sing to us more," cried Polly.

"Then I never should sing, Polly," declared Mother Pepper, with a little laugh. "I shouldn't know what to do, child, if I didn't hear you singing round."

"Shouldn't you, Mammy?" asked Polly, much gratified, and curling down into a little ball at her mother's feet.

"No, dear, I shouldn't." Mrs. Pepper stopped her work long enough to lay her hand caressingly on Polly's brown hair. "Why, it wouldn't seem like the little brown house at all, Polly, and I don't know what we should any of us do, if you stopped it."

"Then I'll sing always for you, Mamsie," said Polly; "I truly will."

"So do, child. Well, I must hurry along, or I shan't get time to begin on those mittens. And just think, Polly, Mr. Atkins has promised to let me knit as many pairs as I can."

"Mamsie," said Polly, suddenly, and hopping

to her feet, "won't you teach me to knit, and then I can help you."

"Yes," said Mrs. Pepper; "for it's good for you to know how. But I shan't be willing to have you help me any more than you do now. I wish you didn't have to work so hard, child," and an anxious cloud overspread the brightness on Mother Pepper's face.

"Oh, I'm not going to work too hard," cried Polly, with happy throbs at her mother's words. And she dashed off to her interrupted work, and Mrs. Pepper smiled, as presently Polly began to sing so merrily that Phronsie set up a little song, till the old kitchen was the cosiest place possible. At last, in a lull, Mother Pepper called, "Polly, what is this stopping at the gate? Tell him we don't want any," as she saw it was a load of wood.

Polly ran to the door, and was beginning to say, "We don't want any wood," when her face turned very white, and she ran over the snow on unsteady feet. "Oh, Joel, what is it?" throwing her arms around him. But before he could answer, there was Mrs. Pepper close behind her.

They lifted Davie down from the pile of

wood, where they had made him as comfortable as possible, Farmer Seeley and Joel; the old man tried to tell that "'Twarn't none o' my fault. Th' boys ran into me," but Joel, for the first time in his life, was without words.

"Mamsie, don't feel badly," said little Davie, putting up his face to be kissed, as her arms received him. Joel flew to Polly for comfort.

"And Mr. Seeley's nice," said David, who had found out the old farmer's name on the long, slow, homeward journey, and now seemed afraid he might be blamed, and not thanked enough.

The old farmer, not hearing this, or indeed much of the talk, kept saying at intervals, "'Twarn't my fault. I ain't to blame," till Mrs. Pepper carried David into the little brown house, and the others, following mournfully enough, the door was shut.

David was laid up with a sprained ankle, that was all, after the upset. But Joel found it dismal enough to play out in the snow alone, and he kept pretty close to the window, so that he could look up and sing out once in a while to Dave seated by it in Mamsie's big rocking chair. And pretty soon, one day, Ben brought

Davie out, all bundled up, and set him carefully on the big sled.

"There you are!" cried Ben, depositing his burden, "as fine as can be," all the rest of the family flocking around to tuck David in tighter, and to pull his tippet closer, and to be sure that he had his mittens on.

"Don't go very far, Joe," cautioned Mrs. Pepper.

"I won't, Mamsie," said Joe, proudly enough, marching off, while the big sled, with Davie sitting upon it as happy as a king, came sliding along behind.

"Hooray!" cried a harsh voice, when they had proceeded in this way for a good distance down the road, David joyfully exclaiming every minute, "Oh, Joey, it's so good to get out doors again."

"Hooray!" screamed the voice again, and Joel, staring as hard as he could, saw two boys pop up from behind a stone wall, and come rushing down toward him, each with a large snowball in his hand. And the next thing, the snowballs flew through the air, and one hit David in the neck, and burst all over his tippet. Joel didn't care that the other one gave him a whack on the head.

"You stop that!" commanded Joel, with a face as red as fire. "Don't you hit Dave again," and his black eyes flashed.

"We're bigger'n you," sneered one boy, and he picked up some more snow, and began to roll it into a hard ball.

"No, you ain't, either," contradicted Joel, who never would acknowledge any one to be bigger than himself. "And you let Dave alone, I say."

"We're going to push him off th' sled," said the other boy, with a dreadful grin.

At this Joel looked all around in despair for a moment to see if any one was coming who would help. "Davie's ankle. O dear me!" he thought. So he got between the sled and the biggest boy. "You let him alone!" he cried sturdily, setting his teeth tight together.

"Hoh — hoh — 'fraid-cat — 'fraid-cat!" laughed both boys, hopping about in glee, and singing over and over, "'Fraid-cat — 'fraid-cat!"

Joel clenched his little brown hands together tightly. It was hard work not to fly at them and pommel away. "But Davie's ankle — dear — dear!" So he held his breath and kept still.

Suddenly both boys made a rush at David,

meaning to make him eat snow and have one ball thrust down his back at one and the same time, but Joel was too quick for them, and the first thing they knew, as David gave a scream at their approach, two hard little fists were pommelling them to right and left.

"Stop it!" they cried. But Joel didn't know how to stop; he pounded away so much and so fast, and they didn't exactly seem to know where he was going to strike next, that in a few minutes both boys were crying as hard as they could.

"'Fraid-cat! 'Fraid-cat!" sang Joel, dancing around them, and swinging his fists in the liveliest fashion.

"Joel Pepper!" exclaimed a voice, suddenly, that made all the boys skip, while little Davie shook in much worse apprehension than he did before. "Fighting in the public road! Well, I never heard anything so dreadful!"

Joel whirled around, his fists still ready. "I ain't fighting," he denied stoutly. It was Miss Jerusha, Parson Henderson's sister.

"And it's bad enough to fight, without telling a lie about it," said Miss Jerusha, holding up her black gloves in horror.

"I ain't fighting. And I didn't tell a lie,' declared Joel. "And you mustn't say so," he added, advancing on her with blazing eyes.

Miss Jerusha retreated. "You're a very bad boy," she said tartly, "and I shall have no more to say to you."

"You must say I don't tell a lie," insisted Joel with unpleasant firmness, and throwing his head back.

"What are you doing, if you're not fighting?" began Miss Jerusha, loudly; "pray tell."

Joel was just going to say, "They were going to hurt Davie," when, before he could get the words out, Polly was seen running down the road toward them all, her hood flying back on her shoulders.

"Oh, Joel, what *do* you think —" she began, when she saw the two boys, and, worst of all, Miss Jerusha; then she came to a dead stop.

"Where are your manners?" snapped that lady, wanting to scold some one. "I'm sure when I was a girl I was pretty spoken, when I met people."

"How do you do, Miss Jerusha?" asked Polly. Then she couldn't help regarding the two boys with wide-eyed astonishment; they dug the toes

of their shoes in the snow, and wouldn't look at her.

"She says I told her a lie," blurted Joel, not taking his blazing eyes from Miss Jerusha's face.

"O dear me!" exclaimed Polly, in the greatest distress. "Joel couldn't tell a lie, Marm; he never did."

Joel flung his black head higher, but he didn't take his eyes from Miss Jerusha's face.

"I'm sure I don't know nor care whether he did or not," retorted Miss Jerusha, shrilly. "And you're very pert, Polly Pepper, to set yourself up against your elders. When I was a little girl I never contradicted folks. Never in all the world! What is your mother thinking of, to bring you up in this way?" And she held up her black gloves again.

"Polly," called little Davie, where he had been crouching timidly in the middle of the big sled, "can't we go home?"

"Yes," said Polly, hoarsely. "Joel, come home with me this minute; don't say another word, Mamsie wouldn't like it," she commanded. She seized the rope, and Joel, removing his eyes with the greatest difficulty from

Miss Jerusha's face, grasped it, too, and the little Peppers went as swiftly as they could go, back home to Mamsie, leaving the other three in the middle of the road.

"O dear!" gasped Polly, as they ran on. Then, "Joel, if we can only get to Mamsie," while back on the sled Davie trembled with delight at the very thought.

In front of the little brown house stood a big comfortable sleigh of the old-fashioned pattern. Although it had once been very handsome, it was now faded and ancient. A man who almost looked as if he had gone into service along with the sleigh and the other belongings of his mistress, sat primly upon the front seat. He expressed as much pleasure at seeing the little Peppers coming, as his stoical countenance would allow, but he didn't move a muscle of face or figure. At any other time Joel would have howled with delight at seeing Miss Parrott's man sitting there before the house, and in a sleigh. And it wouldn't have been a minute before he would have been in that sleigh, and on that front seat, besieging that stiff figure to let him drive. But now Joel flew by, dropping the rope, and rushed into the

house, and Polly was left to drag David to the door, and call to Mamsie to help lift him off. But she stopped to say to Miss Parrott's man, "I must stop to speak to Mamsie, first, if you please."

Miss Parrott's man so far forgot the ancient usage of his years that he rubbed his eyes as Polly turned away, and then he turned and continued to gaze at her as long as she was to be seen. For he really could not believe that it was the same little girl who had danced down the road, with sparkling eyes and rosy cheeks, and he even glanced nervously around, the more he thought about it.

"Mamsie!" cried Joel, hoarsely, flinging himself into Mother Pepper's arms, as she came to the door to meet him, her face beaming with happiness at the realization that Miss Parrott's sleigh actually was waiting at the door to take her little ones for a sleigh-ride, "Mamsie! Miss Jerusha says I told a lie. Did I, Mammy?" and Joel clutched her and broke into a torrent of tears.

And then Polly got there, and Davie was lifted off the sled and carried into the house, and among all three of them the story was out.

And there was Miss Parrott's man sitting stiffly on the front seat of the sleigh, only his head was turned, and his eyes were staring like all possessed at the little brown house.

"Now, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, when there was no more to tell, and the children gazed at her in amazement to see her so cheerful, "you just get yourself ready, as soon as ever you can. Wash your face good, and your eyes, and I'll spring to, and help Joey and Davie. Phronsie's all ready." Indeed, she was, and sitting patiently on her little cricket all this time, her small mittened hands folded in her lap. To Phronsie, every bit of the fuss of getting ready for a trip was always as much of a delight as the expedition itself, and was enjoyed with grave pleasure.

"And, dear me!" continued Mother Pepper, in her briskest fashion, all the while she was washing and patting and pulling the two boys into just the right condition for such a grand occasion as this, "there is Miss Parrott's man waiting out there all this time! Now see how good you can stand still, Joey, and then we'll be as quick as we can be." And pretty soon they were all ready, and Joel's swollen nose

and red eyes didn't look so very much as if he had been crying, and Polly's face showed very little trace, after all, that she had been crying, too. So they all went down to the gate, Mother Pepper and Polly and Joel carrying David, and Phronsie walking gravely behind.

"I am very sorry," said Mother Pepper to Miss Parrott's man, still immovably staring at them, "to keep you waiting. It is not my children's fault, I should say that." Then she helped them in, and tucked the big fur robes all nicely around the three on the back seat. Joel, of course, was by this time snugly settled on the front seat.

"Now, children," said Mrs. Pepper, regarding them for a moment, and standing quite still by the roadside, "you are to have the very nicest time you ever had in all your lives. Remember!" and she smiled at them, and all the sunbeams that ever shone seemed to hop right down into their hearts. Miss Parrott's man solemnly gathered up the reins tighter in his hands, and touched the horses with the whip with the same dignity, and off they went.

Mrs. Pepper watched the big sleigh till she couldn't see a speck of it; then she turned and

went into the house, took down her Sunday bonnet and shawl, for this was to be a call of importance, and soon she had left the little brown house, and was walking rapidly over the snowy road to the minister's house.

"I must get it over with as soon as I can, and be home before they get back," she said to herself, going swiftly on.

It wasn't two minutes before Joel was laughing gayly, and bobbing around with an important air on that front seat to the others on the back seat, and Polly found herself tossing scraps of nonsense back at him and the two others, and little Davie smiled happily. As for Phronsie, she sat wedged in between the other two, her little mittens folded in her lap, in grave satisfaction. Miss Parrott's man drew a long breath when all this was accomplished, and the only word he said for the first two miles was, "I guess you're all right *now*."

Where they went, no one of the four little Peppers could have told. It all seemed like Fairyland, a great enchanted space of winding snowy roads, dazzling in the morning sunlight of a perfect winter day; every little crystal sparkling away on a pine tree, where it had to

melt away, seemed to come out and wink at them, as the stately horses bore them along. All the fields sleeping under their soft, white blankets, were new to the Peppers gliding by. That surely was not Deacon Brown's field, where they used to race across lots, on a summer day! And as for that being Mr. Blodgett's meadow — why! no one need ever tell them so; it was enchanted ground, and they were princes and princesses whirling by in their chariots.

"Let's play so," cried Polly, suddenly, and leaning back against the padded cushion, feeling very glad indeed.

"What, Polly!" cried Joel, wheeling around, at the imminent danger of tumbling out backward, and astonished that Polly should want to play anything when they were enveloped with such richness of enjoyment.

"Oh, that we were princesses and princes," answered Polly, with a grand air, "and we were riding through our kingdom in a big chariot."

"Oh, yes, let's — let's!" screamed Joel, "and I'm the biggest prince," he announced, with another shout. "I wished I had a feather in

my cap," he added ruefully, remembering the splendid one that Grandma Bascom's rooster had furnished for a former occasion, when Polly decked him out a prince, and that was tucked away in his box of treasures in the woodshed, — "O dear! if I'd only brought it!"

"But we haven't got our things," said Polly, quickly, "so you must just play it, Joel. That's as good as having the feather."

"I think it's heaven," said little Davie, with a long breath, hanging out as far as he could over his side of the back seat. "Polly, isn't it?"

"Yes, dear," said Polly, leaning past Phronsie to drop him a kiss, which, by reason of the big sleigh going just then over a hump of frozen snow, fell on the tip of his nose. This made him laugh, and then Polly laughed, and Phronsie came out of her grave delight, to gurgle her amusement; and Joel, hearing them all have such a funny time back there, bobbed around again, and *he* laughed, though he never found out what it was all about.

And Miss Parrott's man learned more about princesses and princes and golden chariots and Fairyland and enchanted things and places in general than he ever heard in his life before,

and when at last they glided into Badgertown Centre, it really seemed as if the cup of happiness would overflow.

"Polly," cried little David, his cheeks aflame under his woollen cap that was drawn close around his ears, and sitting quite erect as a prince should, "the people are all coming out to meet us — the queen and king have sent us to do the errands; haven't they, Polly?"

"Yes," cried Polly, delighted at the idea. "Oh, let's play that!" So the four little Peppers drove down Badgertown main street, where all the shops were, and old Mr. Beebe happened to be standing by his little window watching for customers. "Ma — Ma!" he screamed, "here's the Pepperses goin' by in a sleigh; it's Miss Parrottses, I do declare."

And Mrs. Beebe, stopping to put on her best cap with the pink ribbons before she ran out from the little parlor back of the shop, of course didn't get there till long after the triumphal procession was over. And of all the people who stared and rejoiced in their happiness, — for there wasn't one who saw them who didn't feel glad, down to the tips of the fingers and toes, that the Peppers were going a-pleasuring,

—no one of them all suspected that it was a chariot load of princes and princesses gliding by.

At last it was all over, and the golden chariot paused before the little brown house. Polly and Joel carried David over the snowy path, while Phronsie ran ahead like a mad little thing. And so they all rushed in, royalty dropping off at the old flat door stone.

"We've been princes," cried Joel, as Polly set Davie down, and stamping the snow, gathered on the royal rush over the yard, from his feet, "and I was the biggest prince."

"I was the best," declared David, twitching off his cap that had gotten knocked over his eyes in the scramble to carry him in. "Mamsie, I truly was."

"Oh, Mamsie!" cried Polly, dancing around the kitchen on happy feet, her eyes glowing like stars, "it was perfectly gorgeous!" for Polly dearly loved fine words, and she thought nothing could be too grand for this occasion.

"And I was a princess," piped Phronsie, crowding up to hold fast to her mother's gown. "I truly was, Mamsie. Polly said so."

"So you were," declared Mamsie, smiling happily on her whole brood; "but then, you mustn't ever forget, children, that it's well enough to be princes and princesses once in a while, but you're my little brown house people every day."